MEDAL LIBRARY NUMBER 320

Frank Merriwell's Fortune

By Burt L. Standish

STREET & SMITH • PUBLISHERS • NEW YORK

THE MEDAL LIBRARY

FAMOUS COPYRIGHTED STORIES FOR BOYS, BY FAMOUS AUTHORS

This is an ideal line for boys of all ages. It contains juvenile masterpieces by the most popular writers of interesting fiction for boys. Among these may be mentioned the works of Burt L. Standish, detailing the adventures of Frank Merriwell, the hero, of whom every American boy has read with admiration. Frank is a truly representative American lad, full of character and a strong determination to do right at any cost. Then, there are the works of Horatio Alger, Jr., whose keen insight into the minds of the boys of our country has enabled him to write a series of the most interesting tales ever published. This line also contains some of the best works of Oliver Optic, another author whose entire life was devoted to writing books that would tend to interest and elevate our boys.

PUBLISHED EVERY WEEK

To be Published During September

328—Frank Merriwell's Prosperity..By Burt L. Standish
327—Jack Harkaway's Friends.....By Bracebridge Hemyng
326—A Rattling Good Story.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
325—The Young Franc-Tireurs.....By G. A. Henty
324—Frank Merriwell's New Comedian, By Burt L. Standish
323—The Sheik's White Slave.....By Raymond Raife

To be Published During August

322—A Rattling Good Story.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
321—Snarleyyow, The Dog Fiend.....By Capt. Marryat
320—Frank Merriwell's Fortune....By Burt L. Standish
319—By Right of Conquest.....By G. A. Henty

To be Published During July

318—A Rattling Good Story.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
317—Jack Harkaway's Schooldays.....By Bracebridge Hemyng
316—Frank Merriwell's Problem.By Burt L. Standish

315—The Diamond Seeker of Brazil.....By Leon Lewis
314—Andy Gordon.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
313—The Phantom Ship.....By Capt. Marryat

312—**Frank Merriwell's College Chums,**
By Burt L. Standish
311—Whistler.....By Walter Aimwell
310—**Making His Way**.....**By Horatio Alger, Jr.**
309—Three Years at Wolverton.....By A Wolvertonian
308—**Frank Merriwell's Fame**.....**By Burt L. Standish**
307—The Boy Crusoes.....By Jeffreys Taylor
306—**Chester Rand**.....**By Horatio Alger, Jr.**
305—Japhet in Search of a Father.....By Capt. Marryat
304—**Frank Merriwell's Own Company,**
By Burt L. Standish
303—The Prairie.....By J. Fenimore Cooper
302—**The Young Salesman**.....**By Horatio Alger, Jr.**
301—A Battle and a Boy.....By Blanche Willis Howard
300—**Frank Merriwell on the Road**..**By Burt L. Standish**
299—Mart Satterlee Among the Indians.By William O. Stoddard
298—**Andy Grant's Pluck**.....**By Horatio Alger, Jr.**
297—Newton Forster.....By Capt. Marryat
296—**Frank Merriwell's Protege**....**By Burt L. Standish**
295—Cris Rock.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
294—**Sam's Chance**.....**By Horatio Alger, Jr.**
293—My Plucky Boy Tom.....By Edward S. Ellis
292—**Frank Merriwell's Hard Luck**..**By Burt L. Standish**
291—By Pike and Dyke.....By G. A. Henty
290—**Shifting For Himself**.....**By Horatio Alger, Jr.**
289—The Pirate and the Three Cutters.....By Capt. Marryat
288—**Frank Merriwell's Opportunity**.**By Burt L. Standish**
287—Kit Carson's Last Trail.....By Leon Lewis
286—**Jack's Ward**.....**By Horatio Alger, Jr.**
285—Jack Darcy, the All Around Athlete...By Edward S. Ellis
284—**Frank Me riwell's First Job**...**By Burt L. Standish**
283—Wild Adventures Round the Pole.....By Gordon Stables
282—**Herbert Carter's Legacy**.....**By Horatio Alger, Jr.**
281—Rattlin, the Reefer.....By Capt. Marryat
280—**Frank Merriwell's Struggle**....**By Burt L. Standish**
279—Mark Dale's Stage Venture.....By Arthur M. Winfield
278—In Times of Peril.....By G. A. Henty
277—**In a New World**.....**By Horatio Alger, Jr.**
276—**Frank Merriwell in Maine**....**By Burt L. Standish**
275—The King of the Island.....By Henry Harrison Lewis
274—Beach Boy Joe.....By Lieut. James K. Orton
273—Jacob Faithful.....By Capt. Marryat
272—**Facing the World**.....**By Horatio Alger, Jr.**
271—**Frank Merriwell's Chase**.....**By Burt L. Standish**

270—Wing and Wing.....By J. Fenimore Cooper
269—The Young Bank Clerk.....By Arthur M. Winfield
268—Do and Dare.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
267—Frank Merriwell's Cruise.....By Burt L. Standish
266—The Young Castaways.....By Leon Lewis
265—The Lion of St. Mark.....By G. A. Henty
264—Hector's Inheritance.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
263—Mr. Midshipman Easy.....By Captain Marryat
262—Frank Merriwell's Vacation...By Burt L. Standish
261—The Pilot.....By J. Fenimore Cooper
260—Driven From Home.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
259—Sword and Pen.....By Henry Harrison Lewis
258—Frank Merriwell In Camp...By Burt L. Standish
257—Jerry.....By Walter Aimwell
256—The Young Ranchman.....By Lieut. Lounsberry
255—Captain Bayley's Heir.....By G. A. Henty
254—Frank Merriwell's Loyalty....By Burt L. Standish
253—The Water Witch.....By J. Fenimore Cooper
252—Luke Walton.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
251—Frank Merriwell's Danger....By Burt L. Standish
250—Neka, the Boy Conjurer.....By Capt. Ralph Bonehill
249—The Young Bridge Tender.....By Arthur M. Winfield
248—The West Point Rivals,
By Lieut. Frederick Garrison, U. S. A.
247—Frank Merriwell's Secret.....By Burt L. Standish
246—Rob Ranger's Cowboy Days..By Lieut. Lionel Lounsberry
245—The Red Rover.....By J. Fenimore Cooper
244—Frank Merriwell's Return to Yale,
By Burt L. Standish
243—Adrift in New York.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
242—The Rival Canoe Boys.....By St. George Rathborne
241—The Tour of the Zero Club.....By Capt. R. Bonehill
240—Frank Merriwell's Champions..By Burt L. Standish
239—The Two Admirals.....By J. Fenimore Cooper
238—A Cadet's Honor.....By Lieut. Fred'k Garrison, U. S. A.
237—Frank Merriwell's Skill.....By Burt L. Standish
236—Rob Ranger's Mine.....By Lieut. Lounsberry
235—The Young Carthaginian.....By G. A. Henty
234—The Store Boy.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
233—Frank Merriwell's Athletes....By Burt L. Standish
232—The Valley of Mystery.....By Henry Harrison Lewis
231—Paddling Under Palmettos.....By St. George Rathborne
230—Off for West Point....By Lieut. Fred'k Garrison, U. S. A.
229—Frank Merriwell's Daring.....By Burt L. Standish
228—The Cash Boy.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
227—In Freedom's Cause.....By G. A. Henty

226—Tom Havens With the White Squadron,
By Lieut. James K. Orton
225—Frank Merriwell's Courage....By Burt L. Standish
224—Yankee Boys in Japan.....By Henry Harrison Lewis
223—In Fort and Prison.....By William Murray Graydon
222—A West Point Treasure,
By Lieut. Frederick Garrison, U. S. A.
221—The Young Outlaw.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
220—The Gulf Cruisers.....By St. George Rathborne
219—Tom Truxton's Ocean Trip.....By Lieut. Lounsberry
218—Tom Truxton's School Days.....By Lieut. Lounsberry
217—Frank Merriwell's Bicycle Tour.By Burt L. Standish
216—Campaigning With Braddock....By Wm. Murray Graydon
215—With Clive in India.....By G. A. Henty
214—On Guard.....By Lieut. Frederick Garrison, U. S. A.
213—Frank Merriwell's Races.....By Burt L. Standish
212—Julius, the Street Boy.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
211—Buck Badger's Ranch.....By Russell Williams
210—Sturdy and Strong.....By G. A. Henty
209—Frank Merriwell's Sports Afield.By Burt L. Standish
208—The Treasure of the Golden Crater,
By Lieut. Lionel Lounsberry
207—Shifting Winds.....By St. George Rathborne
206—Jungles and Traitors.....By Wm. Murray Graydon
205—Frank Merriwell at Yale....By Burt L. Standish
204—Under Drake's Flag.....By G. A. Henty
203—Last Chance Mine.....By Lieut. James K. Orton
202—Risen From the Ranks.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
201—Frank Merriwell in Europe....By Burt L. Standish
200—The Fight for a Pennant.....By Frank Merriwell
199—The Golden Cañon.....By G. A. Henty
198—Only an Irish Boy.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
197—Frank Merriwell's Hunting Tour. Burt L. Standish
196—Zip, the Acrobat.....By Victor St. Clair
195—The Lion of the North.....By G. A. Henty
194—The White Mustang.....By Edward S. Ellis
193—Frank Merriwell's Bravery....By Burt L. Standish
192—Tom, the Bootblack.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
191—The Rivals of the Diamond.....By Russell Williams
190—The Cat of Bubastes.....By G. A. Henty
189—Frank Merriwell Down South..By Burt L. Standish
188—From Street to Mansion.....By Frank H. Stauffer
187—Bound to Rise.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
186—On the Trail of Geronimo.....By Edward S. Ellis
185—For the Temple.....By G. A. Henty
184—Frank Merriwell's Trip West..By Burt L. Standish
183—The Diamond Hunters.....By James Grant

182—The Camp in the Snow.....By William Murray Graydon
181—Brave and Bold.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
180—One of the 28th.....By G. A. Henty
179—The Land of Mystery.....By Edward S. Ellis
178—Frank Merriwell's Foes.....By Burt L. Standish
177—The White Elephant.....By William Dalton
176—By England's Aid.....By G. A. Henty
175—Strive and Succeed.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
174—The Golden Rock.....By Edward S. Ellis
173—Life at Sea.....By Gordon Stables
172—The Young Midshipman.....By G. A. Henty
171—Erling the Bold.....By R. M. Ballantyne
170—Strong and Steady.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
169—Peter, the Whaler.....By W. H. G. Kingston
168—Among Malay Pirates.....By G. A. Henty
167—Frank Merriwell's Chums.....By Burt L. Standish
166—Try and Trust.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
165—The Secret Chart.....By Lieut. James K. Orton
164—The Cornet of Horse.....By G. A. Henty
163—Slow and Sure.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
162—The Pioneers.....By J. F. Cooper
161—Reuben Green's Adventures at Yale.....By James Otis
160—Little by Little.....By Oliver Optic
159—Phil, the Fiddler.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
158—With Lee in Virginia.....By G. A. Henty
157—Randy, the Pilot.....By Lieut. Lionel Lounsberry
156—The Pathfinder.....By J. F. Cooper
155—The Young Voyagers.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
154—Paul, the Peddler.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
153—Bonnie Prince Charlie.....By G. A. Henty
152—The Last of the Mohicans.....By J. Fenimore Cooper
151—The Flag of Distress.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
150—Frank Merriwell's School Days.By Burt L. Standish
149—With Wolfe in Canada.....By G. A. Henty
148—The Deerslayer.....By J. F. Cooper
147—The Cliff Climbers.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
146—Uncle Nat.....By A. Oldfellow
145—Friends Though Divided.....By G. A. Henty
144—The Boy Tar.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
143—Hendricks, the Hunter.....By W. H. G. Kingston
142—The Young Explorer.....By Gordon Stables
141—The Ocean Waifs.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
140—The Young Buglers.....By G. A. Henty
139—Shore and Ocean.....By W. H. G. Kingston
138—Striving for Fortune.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
137—The Bush Boys.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
136—From Pole to Pole.....By Gordon Stables
135—Dick Cheveley.....By W. H. G. Kingston

134—Orange and Green.....By G. A. Henty
133—The Young Yagers.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
132—The Adventures of Rob Roy.....By James Grant
131—The Boy Slaves.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
130—From Canal Boy to President.By Horatio Alger, Jr.
129—Ran Away to Sea.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
128—For Name and Fame.....By G. A. Henty
127—The Forest Exiles.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
126—From Powder Monkey to Admiral..By W. H. G. Kingston
125—The Plant Hunters.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
124—St. George for England.....By G. A. Henty
123—The Giraffe Hunters.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
122—Tom Brace.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
121—Peter Trawl.....By W. H. G. Kingston
120—In the Wilds of New Mexico.....By G. Manville Fenn
119—A Final Reckoning.....By G. A. Henty
118—Ned Newton.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
117—James Braithwaite, The Supercargo..By W. H. G. Kingston
116—Happy-Go-Lucky Jack.....By Frank H. Converse
115—Adventures of a Young Athlete....By Matthew White, Jr.
114—The Old Man of the Mountains....By George H. Coomer
113—The Bravest of the Brave.....By G. A. Henty
112—20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.....By Jules Verne
111—The Midshipman, Marmaduke Merry. By W. H. G. Kingston
110—Around the World in Eighty Days.....By Jules Verne
109—A Dash to the Pole.....By Herbert D. Ward
108—Texar's Revenge.....By Jules Verne
107—Van; or, In Search of an Unknown Race,
By Frank H. Converse
106—The Boy Knight.....By George A. Henty
105—The Young Actor.....By Gayle Winterton
104—Heir to a Million.....By Frank H. Converse
103—The Adventures of Rex Staunton....By Mary A. Denison
102—Clearing His Name.....By Matthew White, Jr.
101—The Lone Ranch.....By Capt. Mayne Reid
100—Maori and Settler.....By George A. Henty
99—The Cruise of the Restless; or, On Inland Waterways,
By James Otis
98—The Grand Chaco.....By George Manville Fenn
97—The Giant Islanders.....By Brooks McCormick
96—An Unprovoked Mutiny.....By James Otis
95—By Sheer Pluck.....By G. A. Henty
94—Oscar; or, The Boy Who Had His Own Way,
By Walter Aimwell
93—A New York Boy.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
92—Spectre Gold.....By Headon Hill
91—The Crusoes of Guiana.....By Louis Boussenard
90—Out on the Pampas.....By G. A. Henty
89—Clinton; or, Boy Life in the Country..By Walter Aimwell

Frank Merriwell's Fortune

OR

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

AUTHOR OF

"The Merriwell Stories"

STREET & SMITH, PUBLISHERS

79-89 SEVENTH AVE., NEW YORK CITY

Copyright, 1899
By STREET & SMITH

Frank Merriwell's Fortune

FRANK MERRIWELL'S FORTUNE.

CHAPTER I.

TIME CHANGES ALL.

"No, Frank," declared Elsie, "I cannot play any more. I must have rest. I am ill."

"But, little girl," protested Merry, "how am I to get along without you?"

"There's Cassie Lee, Mr. Havener's fiancée. She has been playing the part since——"

"Since you were led into that trap at Ace High, when you attempted to run away from me. To think you should do such a thing, Elsie!"

"Don't, Frank—please don't reproach me that way," pleaded the pretty, pale-faced girl. "You cannot understand my feelings. Oh, I was driven to it!"

"Inza——"

"Don't mention her!" cried Elsie, her white hands suddenly clinching and two spots of color appearing in her cheeks."

"You were friends."

"Once. Not now—never again!"

Frank frowned. It was difficult for him to understand

the change that had come over Elsie, once so gentle and forgiving. She did not seem at all like her old self, and he wondered at it. Toward Inza she maintained a feeling of resentment and anger that seemed utterly foreign to her nature.

He could not know how her forgiving spirit had been tortured till it rebelled. She had sacrificed her own feelings till her very soul turned in revolt. She had seen self-thought and selfishness so much in others and had received so little credit for her own gentleness that at last, in desperation, she rebelled against her better impulses and permitted herself to be swayed entirely by the powerful and unreasoning instincts of her heart.

Elsie loved Frank Merriwell. He was her ideal in every way, and for him she had been ready to do any thing in her power. Her love had been broad, noble, and unselfish until the time came when she could bear the strain no longer.

Now she was ill, her nerves completely unstrung by her terrible experience in Ace High.

This spirit had manifested itself violently only a few days ago. Frank shuddered as he recalled that day at Blair. With the members of his company he had been playing to excellent business in the rough mining town when Elsie, his leading woman, disappeared. Search revealed the fact that she had fled under the guidance of a villainous miner. Vain as it seemed, Frank pursued her with his friends, and, after a series of adventures, succeeded in rescuing her from the den of villains, at Ace High, into which she had been lured and where, bound

and gagged, she had lain in the cellar while the fight for her release was waged above.

In a nervous collapse she was brought back to Blair, where she explained her strange conduct. Tormented by jealousy of Inza, who was as deeply in love with Frank as she was herself, she had reproached her supposed rival with pursuing Merriwell and, after a violent scene, lost completely self-control and fled. Frank failed to understand the change in her nature, but he sought to comfort her as best he could.

Cripple Creek had been reached and "John Smith, of Montana," was billed for the Grand Opera House. Cripple Creek was alive and hustling, and Merriwell expected to do a big business there. The place had been well billed, and the press had been worked for the very best of the sensational notices which Frank knew so well how to get up.

Merry did not fancy losing Elsie from the cast. After playing Kansas City he had been unable to secure the "bookings" he desired until he reached Colorado. He had attempted to get dates at the Broadway or the Tabor in Denver, but open time was not to be had when he wanted it, and so Denver had been left out, much to his disappointment.

Blair, a new town off the railroad, had sought an attraction to open its new theater, and "John Smith" had been booked for a week. Moving the special scenery required for the piece from Ironton to Blair had been expensive and troublesome, but the result had justified the judg-

ment of Ross Havener, who had urged Parker Folansbee, the backer of the company, to go there.

One night's performance had been missed during the week, but the other five nights were money makers, and the company left Blair in high spirits to make the "jump" to Cripple Creek.

Ouray, Gunnison and Grand Junction were to follow, and then they were to go to Salt Lake City.

In California arrangements had been made to play in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Stockton, Oakland and one or two other cities. It seemed certain that "John Smith" was on the road to big business in the best cities and theaters on the Pacific Coast, and, consequently, everyone appeared happy with the exception of Frank, who was worried over Elsie.

And now, at the hotel in Cripple Creek, Elsie announced that she could not play any more, although Frank had expected that she would return to the stage.

Elsie declared that she and Inza could not be friends again.

"I am sure Inza was very sorry for what happened," said Frank.

"Don't speak of it!" cried Elsie. "I don't wish to talk of her."

Merry bit his lip.

"Don't be unreasonable, Elsie," he urged.

"Frank, I am ill, and I can't bear to talk about her now. I have to think about her, and that is enough!"

"All right, Elsie, we will not talk about her; but you

cannot know how disappointed I am to hear that you will not take your old part again."

"Perhaps I may, Frank—sometime."

"Sometime! That word makes it seem far away."

"Cassie Lee will fill my place. She can do it."

"No."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"No one can fill your place."

"Cassie is an experienced actress, brought up in the profession, and you know I am as yet but little more than an amateur. Of course she can fill my place."

"She can fill the part, but she cannot fill your place, Elsie."

He took her hand and looked tenderly into her eyes, which drooped before his earnest gaze, for at last she understood what he meant.

"I hope not, Frank," she murmured.

"No one can do that," he declared.

"Not even——"

"No, Elsie, not even the one of whom you are thinking, but do not name. No one can fill your place."

"It's good of you, Frank, to say that, and I am sure you mean it, but I have learned to doubt. Once I had confidence in everything and everybody, but a change has come over me, and I find myself prone of doubts and fears."

"You would not doubt me, sweetheart."

"I do not doubt your sincerity, Frank, but time works many changes in us all. I can see that. I can see that as we grow older our views may change, and——"

Merry leaped to his feet.

"Then it is yourself you doubt!" he cried. "You believe that time will change your feelings toward me! Already you see that a change has come over you! I see it, too! Now, I begin to understand!"

Elsie made a weary gesture.

"You understand me less now, Frank, than you ever did before," she asserted. "In one way I shall never change. I know that, deep down in my heart."

"But you do not care for me as you did once."

"No."

"You confess it?" he exclaimed, aghast.

"I do," she said, with bowed head.

Frank stood still and looked at her. He did not pose, and when he spoke, his voice was quiet and steady.

"I did not think it would come to this!" he said.

She looked up at him, and there was something of the old roguish look in her blue eyes.

"Yes, I confess I do not care for you as I did once," she said. "I was a very young girl when I first met you, and I loved you as I might a big, handsome, noble brother. I do not care for you that way now."

Her meaning dawned on him.

"I'm a fool!" he exclaimed, under his breath.

"Elsie!" he cried, and he was bending over her in a moment, her hand clasped in both of his. "Elsie, forgive me!"

"No, no, you bad fellow!" she said, with a weary smile. "You do not deserve it. You really thought——"

"Never mind what I really thought. You fooled me,

Elsie. I would not have you care for me as you did then, but——"

Her eyes were drooping again, and she waited for his next words, with parted lips and fluttering breath.

Rat, tat, tat! came a knock on the door, which was standing slightly ajar.

With a muttered exclamation of annoyance, Frank straightened up and called:

"Come in."

Cassie Lee entered.

"Oh!" exclaimed the newcomer, stopping suddenly. "Beg pardon! I didn't know you were here, Frank."

"Never mind, Cassie," said Merry. "Come right in."

"But I don't want to interrupt you; so I think I'd better make myself scarce."

"No, come in," urged Elsie, although she really wished Cassie would refuse.

"I just called to see if you'd be ready to fill your part to-night, Miss Bellwood."

"No, Cassie, I am not going to play it any more."

"What?" cried the newcomer. "Oh, come off! Excuse the slang. It will slip out sometimes, best a feller can do. You don't mean you're not going to play it at all?"

"Yes, that is what I mean."

"Well, you must be daffy! Why, that part's out of sight! It's the slickest thing I ever struck. I'm not saying that because Frank wrote the play, but because I really think so. You created it, Miss Bellwood, and you are the one to stick to it. They say you do it in great shape. Why,

even Ross says I can't touch you in it, and that's pretty plain spoken for him, seeing that he and I are such good friends."

"Mr. Havener is too complimentary. You know I have not had much experience as an actress, and I am sure you can do the part better than I do it, for you have been on the stage a long time."

"Ever since I can remember," nodded Cassie, coming in and sitting on the edge of the bed. "The theater's been my home all my life. I never feel so much at home anywhere as on the stage; but that don't make me a great actress, by a jugful! I can play soubrette parts, dance, sing and all that; but the audience would throw things at me if I should try *Portia, Rasalind, Desdemona, Camille, Leah* or any of the rest of Shakespeare's stuff."

"But Shakespeare did not write 'Leah' and 'Camille,' you know."

"Didn't he? Why, I thought he did."

"Dumas wrote 'Camille.'"

"Never heard of him."

"And Augustin Daly wrote 'Leah.'"

"Did he? Well, it's great stuff when it's well done, though I don't care much for that sort of thing myself. No singing and dancing in it. If they'd introduce a skirt dance, a Dutch comedian or two like Weber and Fields, and get in an effect like Merriwell's sawmill scene, I think 'Leah'd' be all right. It ain't up-to-date. In order for a play to go now it's got to have a tank in it, a load of hay, a fire engine, a horse race, or something like that. People will pay their good money to go see a load of hay on the

stage, when they can see it in a field for nothing. And every chap who can do a Yankee part well enough so the audience won't egg him off the stage, wants to star in a hayseed play. Bet a dollar Gallup'll get the fever. 'Josh Whitcomb' and 'The Old Homestead' has been responsible for four hundred and ninety-eight of the five hundred hayseed plays that have worried people all over the country. Jest as long as people will put up their coin to see that stuff, that is the stuff to give 'em. But there's a limit."

Cassie was scarcely aware of the depth of her philosophy, or of the rare sarcasm of her remarks about "Leah."

Frank appreciated it all, however, and he laughed, quietly.

"Augustin Daly 'modernized' most of Shakespeare's plays," he said. "Perhaps, if you had suggested it he would have 'modernized' 'Leah' by introducing a fire engine, horse race, or something of that sort."

"No use talking," said Cassie, with a wag of her head, "fellow who writes a play nowadays has got to put some kind of a mechanical sensation into it to make it go."

"Oh, I don't know."

"Don't? Why, didn't you put the sawmill into 'John Smith'? And ain't that what makes the play go?"

"True, I put the sawmill in, but I do not think that is what makes the play go."

"No?"

"Surely not. It makes a fine climax for the third act, but wouldn't the play be interesting without it?"

Cassie admitted that it would.

"And I am writing a play now," said Frank, "in which there is not a single mechanical sensation."

"What? Writing another play?"

"Yes."

"As quick as this?"

"Sure."

"What for?"

"Emergency."

"What sort of emergency? Why, you're making a barrel of money with this piece, and I don't see why you want another play now. Take time to write it, during your summer vacation."

"I am not planning to take a vacation this summer."

"What are you going to do?"

"Work, keep at it, keep on the road."

"Why, you can't make anything."

"I believe I can."

"Where?"

"At Down East summer resorts, in the Adirondacks and around the Great Lakes. I think there is a good thing in it."

"What makes you think so?"

"I was down in Maine last summer, and I saw that the section was being worked by repertoire companies, and they were doing fairly well, though most of them had old pieces or pirated plays. A first-class company, with a stock of good paper, and some top-notch plays, can make money down that way in the summer, unless the people have been disgusted by being fooled by the cheap companies that have toured there every year."

"And you are writing another play so that—what?"

"Well, I hope to make a piece equally as good as 'John Smith.' If I am not molested with 'John Smith,' I shall have two pieces, both new, with which to work the summer resorts. I shall try to pick up one or two more good things to play on royalty, so that we can stay three or four nights in a place."

"You might work in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' 'East Lynne,' and some of them old standbys."

"Not much! The people have had those 'old standbys' till they are more than sick of them."

"Oh, I don't know. 'Uncle Tom's' not so slow. Why, the local managers where we used to play told us lots of times that they had to put 'Uncle Tom' in once a year to get even with the people who wouldn't patronize good shows when they came along. 'Uncle Tom' always drew. That is, it always did till we struck a section of the country where there wasn't any money, so the people couldn't come."

"You may be right, Cassie," laughed Frank, "but I think I'll leave 'Uncle Tom' off the list, and try to give them something new and fresh. But that is not the principal reason for rushing my new play."

"Well, something may happen to 'John Smith.'"

"Something? What?"

"Well, I have seen a storm coming for some little time. It seems that the sawmill business had been used in another piece and is properly protected. If that is true, I may bump up against a wall when I strike some of the larger places."

"Bet it's a big bluff. How'd you get onto it?"

"Well, my piece made a big hit in Kansas City, you know, and, of course, it was reported in the Eastern dramatic papers. Straightway, out comes the manager of this other play, and says I am infringing on his rights with my sawmill scene. He threatens suit, and all that."

"But he hasn't done anything yet?"

"No."

"He won't. Don't worry. Bet he never thought of the sawmill business till he saw the report of your piece, and now he think's he'll swipe it, which he can do, if you ain't had it patented, or copyrighted, or somethinged."

"Well, I have engaged an Eastern lawyer to investigate this man's claims, and I am expecting to hear from him any day."

"Know the lawyer?"

"No."

"Look out."

"What do you mean?"

"Lawyers are crooked. Mebbe he'll go to the other fellow and tell him he'll knock you out for so much. You'll be sold out by your own agent."

"The man I have employed is well known as a square lawyer, thoroughly honest and reliable."

"That kind don't grow."

"The one I have engaged is too prominent to be dishonest in a matter of this magnitude."

"Well, that may save you," admitted the pessimistic Cassie. "But don't you pull 'John Smith' off till the law

steps in and makes you do it. Even then, if you see a ghost of a show to win, you fight it out."

"That advice is all right," smiled Frank, "and I shall take it."

"But Miss Bellwood must go back to her old part. It ain't right for me to come on and take it away from her. Ross wouldn't want me to do that—I know he wouldn't."

"It is fortunate you came on as you did," declared Elsie. "You saved the show from disaster, for my nerves were so unstrung by my fearful experience in the hands of those ruffians that I have been in no condition to play since that time."

"You'll come out all right, if you brace up."

"You do not seem to think of yourself, Miss Lee. If I play the part, what will you do?"

"Oh, never mind me. I can get along somehow. You know Ross and I are going to get married as soon as we can. He thinks his wife is dead, for he can find no trace of her, and he has not heard of her for four years. If we was sure, we'd marry to-morrow. He's been hiring a lawyer, same as you, Frank, and the lawyer thinks he can find positive evidence that Mrs. Havener is dead. If he finds that——"

There was another knock on the door, and Havener himself entered. He held a letter in his hand, and his face was beaming.

"I've got it at last, Cassie!" he cried. "She has been dead for two years! We'll be married right away!"

CHAPTER II.

MEETING A RUFFIAN.

"Ross, is it true?" cried Cassie. "There ain't any mistake?"

"No. The lawyer says there is no doubt of it. She was killed."

"Killed?"

"Yes, in that wreck on the B. & O. two years ago. Here is a newspaper with her name in the list of dead. It's strange I never saw it, but I don't believe I read the list over at the time."

Cassie seemed overcome.

"Let me congratulate you both!" exclaimed Frank, sincerely. "Fate has kept you apart, but now—well, shall we have a wedding to-day?"

"To-day?" gasped Cassie, growing pale. "No, no—not so soon!"

"Why not?" urged Havener. "Haven't we waited long enough?"

"Yes, but—you see—you know—I am not ready."

"Nonsense! You know we would have been married long ago but for the fact that we did not know I was a free man."

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps. Why, what do you mean? You know we would."

"No, I do not know it," said Cassie, who had risen to

her feet and seemed strangely agitated. "There was another reason. You know of my habit—Frank knows of it."

"But that is all past now."

Cassie's agitation increased.

"No, Ross!" she finally exclaimed. "You know I was taken back to a hospital, and they had to give me the stuff again. They injected morphine in my arm to lessen the pain. Then they gave it to me in doses. I had to have it. And now—now——"

She choked and stopped.

"Now——" said Havener, huskily.

"Well, I'm using it again—that's all. I swore I'd never marry you till I had rid myself of the habit. Perhaps I can't break it this time."

"You nearly did it once; you can do it again."

"That came through Frank's aid and advice. He told me to pray for strength to break off the habit. He told me God would hear my prayer, just the same as if I wasn't an actress. I prayed, and my prayer was heard. I know it!"

"Do you think God would listen once, and refuse to listen a second time?" asked Frank, gently.

"But it's too much to go to Him again. What right have I to keep bothering Him with my little troubles? He has other things to look after, and He can't waste His time on me."

"Cassie, you are wrong in your understanding of God. No matter how many times you come to Him 'in sincerity and in truth,' He will hear you."

"That sounds all right, but what have I ever done for Him that He should do so much for me?"

"That makes no difference. Read your Bible, Cassie, and you will find He is loving and kind and all-forgiving."

"I did read the Bible when I was ill in the hospital, and the more I read it the more I realized how thoughtless and bad and wicked I had been all my life. It made me ashamed, and now I haven't the nerve to get down on my knees and ask favors of God any more."

"I am sure you are making a great mistake."

"Perhaps so; but not till I am sure I can break the habit entirely will I get married."

"Now, Cassie," urged Havener, in desperation, "think what a position you are putting me in! You won't let me help you any more, and you have no money, and no engagement. Summer is coming on, and you must get through the dull months somehow."

"I should be a burden to you," protested the girl, weakly.

"Nothing of the sort; you would be an encouragement and a help. I have been doing well since we started out with this piece. Frank has seen to it that I was paid for my work, and, in return, I have done everything in my power to make the piece a success."

"You have, Havener," nodded Merry. "It has been as much by your efforts as anything else that we have done so well. You have rehearsed the company and drilled them till every bit of business is perfection and every one of the cast can repeat the lines backward. I appreciate what you have done."

"And I have been able to put aside some money. I shall put aside some more, and Frank says he will keep through the summer; so you see, it will be all right. You must marry me, Cassie! I will not take no for an answer! I have waited long enough!"

He was masterful now, and, although she continued to refuse, he talked as if it were settled, so that she saw that he really meant to have her anyway and that without delay

Not infrequently that is the way to win a woman. It proved to be the proper way to handle Cassie. She began to give in a little at a time, and it was not long before they were making plans.

"The marriage shall take place in the parlor of this hotel," said Havener. "Merriwell shall be the best man."

"And you, Miss Bellwood," said Cassie, before she thought just what she was saying, "will you be bridesmaid? Will you be able?"

Frank looked at Elsie entreatingly.

"Yes," said Elsie, "I think I can do that. I will."

"Merriwell," said Havener, who seemed to fear that Cassie would change her mind if there was any delay, "go get the minister at once. Tell the members of the company what is going to happen."

"Wait," urged Cassie. "Give me a little time. Let me change my dress."

"No. Don't do that. I like that dress. Besides, we want to do this thing quietly and without any display."

Her objections were overruled, and Frank started for

the minister without delay. As he left the room, Havener said:

"Get a justice if you can't get a minister to come. Don't come back without somebody who can do the job."

"All right," laughed Merry.

He ran down the stairs and out of the hotel. As he bounded down the steps, a rough-looking man seemed to turn out of his way and deliberately bump into him, giving him a hunch with his shoulder.

Frank was nearly knocked down. Indeed, he staggered and barely recovered his equilibrium.

"Waal, who yer runnin' inter?" fiercely demanded the man, glaring at Frank.

"I did not run into you," was the immediate retort, "but you seemed to take pains to deliberately place yourself in my way. If you were a gentleman, you would apologize."

"Hey?" snarled the fellow. "Apolergize—apolergize to a dressed-up monkey? Waal, that makes me laff!"

Frank saw the ruffianly rascal was spoiling for trouble, and so he decided to go on at once and avoid an encounter; but when Merry started to do this the man blocked his path.

"Hold on," he ordered, insolently. "You chaps who wear store clothes seem to think you own the earth and no common man has any right on it."

"I think nothing of the sort," said Merry, quietly. "I believe in equal rights, and I respect any man who is a gentleman, whether he wears store clothes or overalls."

He might have added that he had worn overalls himself and worked among "common men," being in every out-

ward appearance at the time one of them, but he did not say anything of the sort.

Spectators began to gather, but they stood aloof and looked on, as if they did not care to get into trouble by interfering.

Bart Hodge came out of the hotel and stood on the veranda, his hands thrust into his pockets, calmly watching and listening. It was plain that he was not at all concerned but that his friend could take care of himself, for all of the ruffian's savage appearance.

Instead of being soothed by Frank's quiet words, the fellow evidently thought Merry was frightened, and he became all the more insolent.

"Who cares what you believe?" he cried. "You make me tired, you does."

"Please let me pass," said Frank. "I am in a hurry."

"Oh, ye are. Waal, I allow you said somethin' about 'polergizin'. You kin git right down on yer knees an' do that yerself, an' ye wants to be mightly lively about it, or I'll shoot yer full of lead!"

With this threat, the ruffian produced a revolver and pointed it straight at Frank.

"Drop that!"

The stern command seemed to come from directly behind the man, causing him to start and look around.

Frank had not forgotten his tricks of ventriloquism, and so he had thrown the man off his guard.

With a leap, Merry was on him. Clutch, wrench, he had the revolver, having twisted it from the man's hand.

Backward sprang Frank.

"I think I will do a little shooting myself," he said.

Then he seemed to fire straight at the man.

To the spectators it looked as if Frank had fired with the deliberate intention of shooting the man down.

But the man did not fall.

Instead, a button flew from the fellow's clothes.

Shot followed shot, and the buttons flew with every one.

The man danced around and howled, putting up an arm, as if to ward off the bullets.

On the veranda Bart Hodge stood, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, a quiet look of satisfaction on his stern face.

The other witnesses of this remarkable scene were more than astounded.

Five shots Frank fired, and then he paused, with the revolver held ready.

He had clipped five buttons from the man's clothes.

"There is a bullet left in this gun," he said, speaking with the utmost coolness. "I shall not bother to pick off a button with it. If you force me to shoot again, you alone will be to blame in case I put the lead through your body. Down on your knees and ask my pardon."

The fellow hesitated.

"Down!" rang out Frank's clear command; "down, or by the Lord Harry, I shall shoot!"

The ruffian was somewhat dazed, but he realized that a person who could pick off buttons with bullets in that fashion was capable of sending the next bit of lead to a vital spot.

"Don't shoot!" he gasped, flinging up his hands.

"Down on your knees!" ordered Merry. "Get down and apologize!"

Down the fellow dropped.

"Don't shoot!" he begged once more. "I apolergize. I didn't mean northin' nohow. I wuz jest foolin' with yer—'deed I wuz, pard! I'll swaller ev'rything I said."

The muzzle of the weapon pointed straight at the man as he cowered there. It was elevated the least trifle, and then there was a spout of smoke, a sharp report, a yell from the frightened wretch.

Down on his face fell the man, his hat flying off.

"Murder!" he howled. "Help! Save me! Murder!"

With a short laugh of contempt, Merry flung the revolver at the prostrate, cowed bully, and then quietly walked past him and away, never once turning his head to look round.

A man who had been watching it all met him and said:

"It was kind of tough to shoot a critter when he was on his knees, but I reckon you have done a service to this place, young man. Ben Baxter never was any good, and he ought to have been hung long ago. He has made trouble enough here, and I'm glad somebody snuffed him out. But I reckon you'll pay the expenses of the planting? It's your cadaver."

Frank laughed.

"My dear sir," he said, 'Mr. Baxter is not injured in the least."

"What? Why, there he lays on his face, howling like a kicking dog! I allowed you'd shot him clean through."

"Nothing of the sort. I simply clipped a few buttons

off his clothes in the first place to show him that I could shoot, and then, with the last shot I put a bullet hole through his hat, that he might remember me. He is entirely untouched."

"Well, may I be kicked!" exclaimed the disgusted spectator. "I thought by the howl he let out when you popped at him the last time that you had done him sure. I don't think you have a right, young man, to raise such hopes in the hearts of the peaceful citizens of this place unless you finish the job."

His manner showed keen disappointment, forcing Frank to laugh again.

"I believe you would have been better satisfied had I finished Mr. Baxter."

"I certainly should. I object to being fooled in this manner."

"Perhaps I'd better go back and complete the job," observed Merry, jokingly.

"I think it would be an excellent idea," nodded the citizen, gravely.

"But it's a trifle too much, you know. A man's conscience would trouble him if he shot such a cringing cur as that."

"I rather think you are right in that respect," admitted the citizen. "You should have finished him when you first took the gun from him, and then the coroner's jury would have cleared you by saying he came to his death accidentally."

"Accidentally?"

"Yes."

"How could the jury have rendered such a verdict if I had shot him?"

"Well, you see, it would have been a clear case of self-defense on your part, and nobody would have wished to cause you the least trouble. It would have been an accident so far as Baxter was concerned, for he would have let you alone had he known what was coming."

Frank laughed still more heartily.

"That is plain enough. I see I might have rendered a great service to Cripple Creek, but it is too late now, so I think the citizens of the place will have to forgive me for failing to shoot Ben Baxter instanter on getting his gun."

"You seem to be a very self-possessed young man. Might I ask your name?"

"It is Frank Merriwell."

"Then you are connected with the show that is to be in the Opera House to-night?"

"Yes."

"I see your name on the bills. Well, young man, a show tenderfoot who can meet and do up Ben Baxter is worth seeing. I shall come to your show to-night."

"And so shall I!"

"Same here!"

"Me, too!"

Three other men had approached while Frank and the citizen were talking, and they announced their intention of seeing Frank across the footlights.

"Thank you, gentlemen," said Merry, bowing to them.

"I shall be pleased to have you come, and I think you will be pleased to be there. If you do not say 'John Smith, of Montana,' is all right after the final curtain, I shall be happy to refund the money to you at the box office."

"That's the talk!"

"You're all right!"

"He's a dandy!"

"Hooray for Frank Merriwell!"

The four swung their hats and cheered, and others at a distance took it up.

Ben Baxter rose to his knees and looked round to see what it was about. He drew a deep breath of relief, picked up his hat, looked at the bullet hole through it, snatched his revolver, jumped to his feet and hurried away.

Standing on the hotel veranda, Bart Hodge smiled grimly.

"Luck and pluck seem to go together," he muttered. "It took pluck to face that ruffian, and the luck follows, for it was a great piece of advertising, and we will have a packed house to-night."

CHAPTER III.

A PERSISTENT FOE.

Frank decided that it was best to see a justice to find out about the marriage laws of the State, and so he inquired for the office of one.

Just as he reached the door of the office he sought a man came out. Frank recognized the individual instantly, and he was instantly recognized.

It was Philip Scudder, the man who had stolen Merry's play in St. Louis.

Scudder stopped and regarded Frank with an insolent stare.

The young actor-playwright would have passed on without a word, but Scudder spoke.

"Hello!" he said, sneeringly. "So you've arrived."

"After your experience in Blair, I didn't suppose you would stop running till you were out of Colorado," said Frank, cuttingly.

"Oh, I didn't run so far."

"You ran far enough to escape from the men who were after you with a rope. You were more fortunate than your friend Lockwell."

"Lockwell!" cried Scudder. "You destroyed him! You are responsible for the poor fellow's death!"

"You know that is not true, Philip Scudder. You are the one who is responsible for all that happened to Percy Lockwell, and you should have been in his place when

the men of Blair swung him to the limb of a tree! He was your agent. You sought revenge on me because you failed in your attempt at St. Louis to rob me; you did so even after I let up on you for the sake of your unfortunate wife, and did not prosecute you. You urged Lockwell to do me an injury. He tried it after getting into the company, but failed and was exposed. The fellow was not well balanced, and he became insane over the failure of his efforts. When I exposed him in his attempt to cheat Parker Folansbee at poker he seemed to lose his head entirely. After that he wanted to murder me. No one but an insane man would have tried the things he attempted. He followed me from place to place like a Nemesis, but he made a fatal mistake when he attempted to disfigure Elsie Bellwood for life. That act set the young men of Blair on his trail, and they did not stop till they had strung him to a tree. You were fortunate to get away. I consider you a greater rascal than Lockwell, although you have not the nerve to go to the extremes as he did."

"Well, are you done croaking?" asked Scudder, in an insulting tone. "If you are, I have a few words to say."

"Nothing you can say will interest me."

"Oh, I don't know! You may be interested later on. You have just about reached the end of your rope. I know something that will happen before many hours that will bring you up with a round turn. Your gay career on the road ends right here in Cripple Creek."

"You are not the first man who has tried to bring my career to an end. I don't suppose you will be the last."

"Oh, I am not the only one in this business here. There are others. It will be a sure job this time."

"You are trying to put up a big bluff, but bluffs from such men as you do not go with me."

"You will find this is no bluff."

"Well, go ahead and do whatever you can, but be careful, for there is law in Colorado as well as elsewhere."

"You are right, and this time you will find the law against you."

"What are you driving at, man?"

Scudder nodded his head and winked.

"Oh, you'll find out later," he said, significantly. "The tour of Frank Merriwell, the great actor and play writer, will come to a sudden termination."

"So you say."

"So you will know before long. You have made considerable talk about my trying to steal your play. How about the things you have stolen and put into your play? Ha! That hits you! I knew it would!"

Scudder showed his teeth in a triumphant grin.

Frank remained perfectly cool, although at last he fancied he understood what his enemy was driving at in his insinuations and hints.

Scudder was aware of the fact that another play writer and manager claimed that Merry was infringing on his rights. It was likely that he had seen the other fellow's notice in the Eastern dramatic paper.

"It is easy enough to talk about such things," said Frank, "but it is rather more difficult to prove the claims."

"Oh, it can be proven that you are a plagiarist, a thief, a robber. I know it! You know it!"

"You lie, Scudder!"

Frank did not lift his voice in the least, but there was plenty of emphasis in his words.

Scudder turned pale and his hands clinched convulsively.

"I'd like to ram the words down your throat!" he exclaimed, in a threatening tone.

"I'd like to have you try it," declared Merry. "It would give me great pleasure. As a rule, I try to avoid fighting, but I think I would enjoy giving you the thrashing you deserve. Won't you be kind enough to try a little ramming?"

"Oh, I'll be concerned in some ramming that you won't like! But I wouldn't soil my hands by putting them on you!"

"Too bad! Can't you cover your hands with gloves? I would enjoy it very much if you would do something to give me a reasonable excuse for knocking you down."

"Oh, you crow loud, but your comb will be clipped before long."

"You will not be able to clip it, Scudder."

"I'll have a hand in it, be sure of that."

"Then it will be some sort of a crooked game, for I don't believe you ever had a hand in anything that was square and honest in your life."

These stinging words from Frank's lips caused the fellow to fairly writhe, but he knew better than to assault the ex-Yale athlete, although he longed to smash him.

"You are a fine fellow to talk about honesty!" he spluttered. "You have been traveling around posing as a great play writer, when you haven't brains enough to write a successful play, and so you steal the work of some other man's brains."

"That is all you can say, Scudder. When you are at loss for words, you fall back on that, and you know full well enough that there is no truth in it. I am here on business, and I shall waste no more words with you."

Frank was about to pass on, when, meaning it as a parting shot, Scudder flung at him:

"You are not the only one who will get into trouble. Some of your chief associates are booked for jail—one in particular."

"I have heard quite enough of your meaningless talk," said Frank. "Keep out of my way in the future, Scudder. I shall pay no attention to you, unless you force me to knock you down because of your insolence. You are not worth wasting words on."

"You will find I am not wasting words. What I say means something. Both you and one of your chief pushers will be under arrest before night. 'John Smith' will not be played in Cripple Creek. As for that matter, it will never be played anywhere again."

Frank smiled and walked on into the office. Just inside the door he paused and looked round. Scudder was hurrying across the street toward a man who seemed to be waiting for him. That man was dressed in a blue uniform and wore a badge on his breast. It was the chief of police of Cripple Creek.

As Scudder reached the officer he took a paper from his pocket and placed it in the man's hand. The chief opened it, looked it over and nodded. A brief but animated conversation took place between the two.

"Now, I wonder just what that does mean?" speculated Merry. "Somehow, I really believe that fellow is trying to injure me by legal means, now that he has failed in every other way. I must be on my guard. I would give not a little to know just what he is up to, for then I might be able to thwart him."

A veiled woman came down the street and approached the two men. Scudder seemed to introduce her to the chief of police, who lifted his helmet. Then the conversation was continued by the trio.

"This grows still more interesting," muttered Frank. "Who is that woman, and what part does she play in the game? Something is in the air, I can feel it. There is a storm coming."

Despite his courage, Merry was beginning to feel uneasy. It seemed evident that some kind of a plot was being worked up against him, and, not knowing exactly what it was, he feared he would not be in a position to checkmate the move.

After a few seconds the two men and the veiled woman moved up the street. Frank watched them till they entered a doorway and disappeared from view.

"Hodge is right in claiming that Scudder is a thorough rascal," said Merry. "He is relentless in his hatred of me, and he will go to almost any extreme to hurt me."

Then he entered the office.

A man who had been talking with the justice rose to his feet as Merry came in and turned to leave. He was about thirty years old, smartly dressed, red-headed and had a well-trained, sandy mustache. As he passed out he gave Frank a sharp and curious stare, paused as if to speak, but immediately changed his mind and went out.

As the door closed behind him Frank spoke to the foxy-faced individual who had risen to greet him.

"Are you Mr. Downs, the justice?"

"I am, young man," replied that individual, rubbing his hands together as if he were washing them. "What can I do for you? This is an unusually lively morning. Business is coming on the rush."

"Would you mind telling me who the gentleman was who just went out?"

"His name is—er—ah—Randolph Weston."

"Belong in town?"

"No. He is from New York. Lately come West."

"On business?"

"Ah—er—yes, sir."

Frank felt that he would like to know the nature of Mr. Weston's business, but he refrained from asking any further questions about the man.

However, he had no scruples in asking about Scudder.

"There was another man who left the office a few moments ago—Scudder by name. I presume he had business with you?"

"Oh, yes. He called for some papers I have been fixing up."

"Papers? Then he has legal business in Cripple Creek, and he is also a stranger here."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, I regret to say that I do."

"Regret? He seemed to be a very pleasant gentleman."

"I presume he is capable of making a good appearance when he tries. Is his business a secret?"

"Well, yes—ah—er—it is. You see, it would not be right for me to say anything about it."

"I understand. Very well. I have some business to transact with you."

Frank made some inquiries about the marriage laws of the State, and then asked the address of a minister to perform the ceremony.

"I can attend to that, sir," assured Mr. Downs. "You do not need to look further."

"But I believe the parties desire the service of a minister."

"I have filled the pulpit myself."

"You?" cried Frank, in surprise.

"Yes, indeed."

"But you are a justice now."

"I found the law paid better than the ministry, young man, and so I abandoned the pulpit."

This was rather amusing for Frank and he could not repress a smile.

"Perhaps you will do as well as anybody," he said. "It will save delay, at any rate."

"Very true, very true, sir. Will you bring the parties here to my office, or shall I——"

"The ceremony is to take place in the hotel where we are stopping."

"Very well," said Mr. Downs, catching up his hat and clapping it on his head. "My fee will be twenty dollars, strictly in advance."

"Your fee? I believe it is customary to allow the groom to give such a sum as he chooses."

"It may be customary in some places, but not in Cripple Creek, especially in dealing with strangers."

"Don't you think twenty dollars rather exorbitant?"

"Not in the least."

"Well, I think I will look for a minister."

"Oh—ah—er—in case you may not feel like paying so much," Mr. Downs hastened to say, "I will accept less, performing the ceremony as a favor."

"We do not care to have it performed as a favor—by a justice. If you perform it, it will be a matter of business, and you will receive ten dollars—not a cent more."

"Oh, well, I'll accept that. I'll have to charge you ten dollars for counsel."

"What?"

"I believe you sought my advice in this matter, and I answered some questions in reference to the laws of the State. Ten dollars, please."

Frank was forced to laugh.

"You are determined to have twenty dollars out of it, I see. Well, all right. I presume that is the way you do business. When you get hold of a tenderfoot, you work

him for all there is in it. It is a rule many men go by; but I do not wonder that you abandoned the ministry and went into law."

Frank passed over ten dollars, for which he demanded a receipt.

Mr. Downs hastily scribbled one on a piece of paper, stating that the money was received in payment for legal counsel.

"Now give me another receipt for ten more," said Merry, "which is for performing a marriage ceremony."

The paper was filled out and handed to Frank in exchange for a crisp bank note.

"If business would keep up as it has begun this morning I'd have money to burn in a few months," chuckled Norton Downs, stowing the bank note away.

Then he picked up a book and announced that he was ready to follow Merry.

They went out, the justice locking the door of his office behind him.

At the hotel, although Frank had notified none of the company, they found the report had been circulated that Havener and Cassie were to be married, and all were anxious to know when the ceremony was to take place.

It was not long before an expectant party gathered in the parlor, awaiting the appearance of the bride and groom, with the attendant bridesmaid and best man.

There was very little delay. Havener and Cassie appeared, accompanied by Frank and Elsie.

It is probable there were very few in the room who did not note the contrast between the two couples. Al-

though she was pale, Elsie looked very sweet and charming as she clung to the arm of the handsome star of "John Smith."

"By gosh!" Ephraim Gallup whispered to Hodge, "anybody'd think Frank an' Elsie was the ones to git merried. They might do it, an' make this air a double weddin'!"

"Not much!" hissed Bart. "Frank Merriwell ain't such a fool! If he gets married inside of six years, I'll shoot him!"

"Thutteration! I don't s'pose he'll ax yeou when he shell git merried!" gurgled Gallup, flushing. "Yeou ain't his guardeen by a darn long sight!"

"He'll need one if he gets married before he's twenty-five, and that will be nearly six years from now. I don't take stock in youthful marriages."

"Oh, yeou don't take no stork in northing!" Gallup almost exploded. "Yeou're alwus turnin' up your nose."

Everything had been arranged, and there was no delay now. However, when Norton Downs stood up to perform the ceremony, with Havener and Cassie before him, he heard the name of the groom for the first time, and he seemed startled.

"What name did you say?" he asked Frank, in an aside.

"Havener—Roscoe Havener," answered Merry.

The justice seemed confused, hesitated and then suddenly began to feel in his pockets, producing a ten-dollar bill, which he held toward Frank, saying:

"Take it back, young man."

CHAPTER IV.

AN INTERRUPTED MARRIAGE.

"Why, what does this mean?" asked Merry, in surprise.

"I cannot perform the ceremony."

"Can't?"

"No, sir."

Havener was glaring at Downs.

"Why can't you perform the ceremony?" he demanded. "What sort of a trick is this?"

"No trick at all, sir," assured the foxy-faced little man, rubbing his hands together. "There is a reason why I cannot marry you to the young lady."

"Then state it," commanded the stage manager of the Midland Dramatic Company, almost fiercely. "Out with it."

"Excuse me; I'd rather not."

"Well, you must. Think I'll put up with this kind of nonsense? Come, sir, state your reason for refusing to marry us, and be sure it is a good reason, too."

"It is a very good reason," declared the justice, who was extremely agitated.

"Out with it!" Havener again commanded. "Why won't you perform the ceremony?"

"Because the marriage would not be legal," was the answer that astonished everybody.

"Not legal?" exclaimed Merry. "But you told me——"

"Everything I told you was straight," assured Downs, shaking; "but—but——"

"But what?"

'There is another reason why it would not be legal."

"Stop beating about the bush and come to the point at once," said Havener, grimly. "What is that reason?"

"Perhaps I had better tell it to you privately," faltered Mr. Downs.

Havener suddenly grew pale.

"No," he said, "tell it here before everybody. Why wouldn't the ceremony be legal?"

"Because—because you already have a wife."

"It is not true!" Havener cried. "My wife is dead, and I have the evidence of her death!"

"You are very much mistaken, my dear, slippery hubby!" said a female voice, and into the room stepped the mysterious veiled woman whom Frank had seen talking with Scudder and the chief of police, who now followed her closely. "I am very much alive, as you will confess."

She flung back her veil.

Havener stood there as if turned to stone. Not a word, not a sound escaped his lips. He stared at her in unspeakable horror. After some seconds he gasped:

"It is my wife—alive!"

"Very much so," mocked the woman. "Officer, there is your man. You have the warrant. Arrest him!"

The chief of police advanced on Havener, placed a hand on his shoulder and sternly said:

"You will have to come with me."

"Hands off!" burst from the man's white lips. "Hands off, or by the gods——"

The chief made a rapid move, but Frank stepped in, saying:

"Steady, Havener! Don't resist. We'll fix this thing."

"But it's an outrage!" protested Havener, hoarsely.

The woman who claimed to be his wife laughed. She had a coarsely handsome face and there was rouge on her cheeks. Her laugh was like a blow in the face.

"Oh, he cringes!" she said; "and he talks about an outrage! He who was about to deceive this unfortunate girl by marrying her. I have saved him from committing bigamy, but he shall pay dearly for his neglect of me all these years."

"Woman!" cried Havener, his face corrugated with passion, "how dare you appear and make such a charge against me?"

Again she laughed.

"Anyone would know you were an actor just to hear you say that," she said. "You can't deny that you failed to support me."

"Why should I support such a woman as you? You betrayed me—you were false to me. You deserted me for another man, and I suppose he, in turn, deserted you."

"How can you try to put up such a weak bluff? You must know it won't go. You tired of me and threw me over."

"Woman, you——"

"Steady!" again came Merry's cautioning voice. "Be careful what you say, Havener."

"It's a lie!" panted the man. Then he turned to Cassie, whose eyes were fastened on the accusing wife. "You do not believe her, do you?" questioned Havener. "You do not believe her, Cassie?"

"No," said the little soubrette, quietly. "I know she is lying, Ross. I can see it in her face."

"Thank Heaven for your confidence!" he muttered, hoarsely. "This—this is the bitterest moment of my life!"

"You do it splendidly, old boy," cried the false wife, with mock admiration. "I believe you can act better than you used to, and you always were pretty good."

Strangely enough, at that moment Frank Merriwell thought:

"Here is a situation from life that would make a strong climax to an act of a play. Don't forget it. Make a note of it at the first opportunity. It is the very thing you have been wanting for a curtain situation in your new piece."

The faculty of observing and mentally recording strong situations in actual life, which every author and playwright acquires, was developing in him.

It is a remarkable thing that, no matter what happens, an author almost invariably thinks of it as "copy." Often he will find himself calmly viewing and analyzing the most tragic events of his own life, and he will say: "I must not forget this, for it will be simply great if I handle it right." He may do this at the very moment when the tragedy is taking place. Unconsciously he seems to stand apart from himself and the others with whom he is associated in the action and look on as if he were a dispassionate observer. And it is almost certain that one who

has not lived and loved, been happy and suffered, struggled and conquered, been tempted and triumphed, cannot successfully depict the sensations that come to human beings who pass through the vicissitudes of life.

Many a youthful writer of fiction wonders why his stories do not meet the approval of editors. In many cases it is because he had not lived and experienced. The emotions he attempts to describe are not the emotions he has really and truly sounded to their depths, but he is trying to describe them as he has read of them in other stories.

So it is not strange that, in the midst of this thrilling scene that was taking place there in the hotel, Frank Merriwell thought that it would make a good "situation" in his new play.

In the wife who had deserted Havener Frank saw a powerful character for his play. He studied her then, he made mental note of her looks, her gestures and her words.

He saw that she had been handsome once, in a certain way; but beneath the surface there had been a coarseness that was growing more and more apparent with passing years. She was dashing now, but her face wore a brazen look. Some men would have been attracted by her, but she would have been repulsive to any man of refinement.

Frank pitied Havener, for he saw that the man was suffering intensely, having fully believed that his wife was dead till the very moment when she appeared in that room.

The woman gloried in the scene and the sensation she

had created. She felt that she was the central figure in the little drama in real life, and she was happy.

But Frank had not forgotten Philip Scudder. His eyes sought for and found his enemy. Scudder was standing near the door, watching Frank, and there was sneering triumph on his face. He grinned as Merry looked at him, saying:

"This is the beginning, Mr. Merriwell. It's pretty warm now, but there is more to follow."

"So you had a hand in this!" exclaimed Merry. "Well, I understand some of the talk you made to-day. But I don't think you will make much out of it in the end."

"Oh, you don't know what's coming."

"Is this his job?" said Hodge, at Frank's elbow. "Did he put the woman on track of Havener?"

"Without doubt he did," answered Frank.

"Then let me get one crack at him!" whispered Bart, pleadingly. "I'll agree to give him a mark that he'll carry for a while."

"It won't do—now," said Frank. "The fellow deserves something worse. Still it is a good thing for Havener that the woman appeared in time to prevent this marriage. He has escaped committing bigamy."

"I thought her dead!" groaned Havener.

The woman heard him.

"That is a good bluff," she said, "but it won't go down, old fellow. I suppose that's what you told the girl."

"Your name was in the list of killed in the B. & O. wreck two years ago. I have the paper. My lawyer reported that there was no doubt of your death."

"Your lawyer was a chump. I was in the wreck, but they mistook one of the stiffs for me. I came out without a scratch, so I couldn't even sue the company, and so I kept still."

"You see how it was, Cassie," said Havener, desperately. "I had every reason to believe her dead."

"Yes, I see, Ross," said Cassie.

"And you still believe in me?"

"With all my heart, Ross!" cried the little soubrette, flinging her arms about him.

"Here, here!" cried the woman. "Quit that! That man is my husband! How dare you! Ha! ha! ha!"

"How dare I?" flung back Cassie, defiantly. "Because I love him! You have no right to him! He is mine!"

And then, standing on her toes, she kissed him.

"What a sight for a loving and devoted wife!" mockingly cried the adventuress. "How it wrings my heart! Take him away, officer! Lock him up! We'll see if he will support me in the future!"

"I'll stand by you, Havener," assured Merriwell. "Folansbee has money, and we'll have you out on bail right away. This woman can't sustain her charges. You will get your divorce, and you shall marry Cassie. Keep a stiff backbone."

"Thank you, Merriwell," said Havener, huskily, as Frank grasped his hand and gave it a warm pressure. "You are a true friend—a friend worth having."

Then he was led away.

Scudder paused to cast one more sneer at Frank.

"How do you think you will get along without your

stage manager and best man?" he asked, triumphantly. "Oh, you won't cut much ice in Cripple Creek!"

Hodge clutched Merry's arm convulsively.

"Please, Frank—please let me thump him!" pleaded the passionate fellow. "I'll do a good job."

"And be arrested for assault," said Merry. "Without doubt, he hopes to provoke one of us to assault him. He is trying to break up the show to-night."

"He has succeeded already. It can't be any worse, and I'll pay my fine if I'm arrested. I'd willingly give fifty dollars just to hit that rascal one good soaker!"

"I tell you it won't do! The time will come to hit him, and I hope to give him a blow that will be heavier than a blow from a clinched fist. Hold yourself down, Bart."

"Oh, you two may whisper and glare at me!" cried Scudder. "I am not afraid of you both. You've got it where the chicken got the ax! But don't forget that there is more to follow. I have struck my blow, but you will have some personal dealings with the law, Mr. Frank Merriwell. The day is not over, and I happen to know what is in store for you."

Frank turned away and, with a last triumphant laugh, Scudder followed the adventuress from the room.

Elsie was doing her best to console Cassie, who seemed to have collapsed, now that Havener was gone. The members of the company gathered about in a sympathetic group, even Leslie Lawrence expressing his regrets.

Lawrence had been keeping pretty quiet for some time,

and the fate of Lockwell seemed to have cowed him completely.

Now he drew Douglas Dunton aside and said:

"I have seen that woman before."

"What woman?" asked Dunton.

"The one who claims to be Havener's wife."

"Who claims to be! Why, he didn't deny that she was his wife! Don't you think the man knows his own wife?"

"Yes, but she is an adventuress."

"That don't make it any better for Havener. He married her, and the poor devil is in a bad fix, although I don't believe she will be able to make him support her. Just the same, he is hitched to her, and he can't marry Cassie till he gets a divorce. This fellow Scudder, a friend of your former friend Lockwell, has brought about Havener's arrest in order to knock the show out. If he knocks the show out, you are knocked out, and I believe you have been getting your cold cash regularly every week. You see what such friendship amounts to. You will get left, along with the rest of us, if Scudder succeeds."

Lawrence saw that, and it made him feel sore. He had no sympathy for Frank, but he was thoroughly aroused by the danger of losing his own salary. Entirely selfish, he saw that he must suffer if Frank suffered, and, all at once, he began to feel sorry that Scudder had succeeded so well in his little game.

"Scudder may get into trouble himself," said Lawrence, in a meaning way.

"How?" asked Dunton.

"Oh, I know," was the answer.

"If you know anything that will get Havener out of this scrape, take my advice and make use of your knowledge in a hurry."

"I am not sure," said Lawrence; "but I have an idea. I'll have to find out if I'm right."

"Well, you want to find out in a hurry."

Frank had been speaking with Elsie and Cassie. Now he looked around for Hodge, but Bart and Ephraim were gone.

"Go up to the rooms with the girls, Miss Harrison," said Frank, to the leading lady. "I must see Folansbee and see what can be done for Havener."

Lilian Bird and Hattie Harrison accompanied Cassie and Elsie from the parlor. The men of the company were left there, and they were able to express their feelings in language that would not have sounded particularly polite before the ladies.

Parker Folansbee came in from the office, wiping his lips with his handkerchief.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said. "I was forced to go to the bar for a bracer. This—ah—unfortunate affair completely upset my nerves. What are we to do, Merriwell?"

"We must get Havener out on bail," answered Frank. "We must play in Cripple Creek to-night."

"That's right," agreed the backer of the company, "for we are bound to have a great house. At the bar they are talking of the way in which you shot the buttons off the clothes of one Benjamin Baxter with the said Benjamin's own revolver. It seems that Mr. Baxter is what is re-

garded in this town as a 'bad man,' and your little feat has covered you with such glory that it is said the whole town will want to see you in the play. We can't afford to miss the performance to-night."

"Not if you have to fill Havener's place," said Frank.

"Oh, Lord!" gasped Folansbee, turning pale. "I couldn't do it to save my life!"

"Then we must get Havener out of jail."

"That's right."

"You have the money to do that."

"It is probable that we shall be forced to find a resident of the place to stand the bail, and I will have to secure him. I have no property in this town, and so I can't become a bondsman here."

"Well, will you see what can be done?"

"Yes."

"Go to the proprietor of the hotel. You may be able to make arrangements with him, or he may direct you to somebody who will help us out."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to get Cassie and follow Havener to the jail."

"What for?"

"There is no telling what Havener may think of doing. If there was a way, he might end his own life in despair, now that his wife has appeared and he feels that he is in a hopeless fix. He must be encouraged, and Cassie is the one to do that."

"You are right, Merriwell. You always seem to know the best thing to be done. I'll do everything I can to

get him out. Tell him that. Tell him we'll have him out as soon as possible."

"All right," nodded Frank. "Now where is Hodge?'

At that moment Bart came sauntering into the room, his hands in his trousers pockets, a peculiarly satisfied expression on his stern face.

Ephraim Gallup followed, and the Vermonter seemed ready to burst with suppressed laughter.

"What is the matter with you, Ephraim?" demanded Frank, rather sharply. "I don't see anything to laugh at just now."

"I don't just naow," drawled the Yankee youth; "but I did jest a few moments agao, b'gosh!"

"What was that?"

"Waal, I saw Hodge knock more'n seventeen kainds of tar aout of Mr. Philup Scudder," shouted Gallup. "Oh, haw! haw! haw! It was the funniest thing I've seen in a hull year! Oh, haw! haw! haw!"

He pressed his huge hands to his stomach and his mirth literally doubled him up like a jackknife.

CHAPTER V.

A DESPERATE GIRL.

"What's this?" demanded Frank, looking at Bart. "You didn't have a fight wth Scudder, did you?"

Bart shook his head, still looking perfectly satisfied and contented.

"No, I didn't have a fight," he answered.

"That's right," cried Gallup. "It wasn't a fight. Bart didn't give him time to fight none. He jest done Scudder up in no time. Oh, haw! haw! haw! Frank, yeou'd never got over larfin' if yeou'd bin thar to seen it."

"But I told you——" began Merry, speaking to Bart.

"I know you did," confessed Hodge. "I couldn't help it. I had to hit the fellow."

"Now you will be arrested."

"Let um arrest," said Gallup. "They can't prove nothing by me, an' I was the only one to see it."

"How did that happen?" asked Frank.

"I simply followed him till he turned up between two buildings," explained Bart, "and then I went in after him in a hurry, and gave it to him."

"Without warning?"

"Warning!" cried Hodge, in disgust. "Who would warn a snake?"

"Oh, he turned araound and saw Hodge comin'," chuckled Ephraim. "He put up his hands to fight, but he might jest as well have kept um daown. Before he knowed

it—biff!—Bart soaked him in the eye, and he cum nigh turnin' a back somerset, b'gosh! Haw! haw! haw!"

Frank was forced to smile.

"I didn't think you would do it after what I said," he declared, looking reprovingly at Hodge.

"I had to do it," protested the dark-faced youth. "I couldn't help it, Frank. As a rule I do as you wish me to, but this time I was obliged to do as I wanted to."

"And yeou done it in beautiful shape," nodded the Vermonter. "Scudder, he gave a howl and jumped right up, but he didn't no more'n git onter his pins before Hodge soaked him a sockdolager in t'other eye, an' slam he went daown ag'in."

"What did you do?" asked Frank. "I hope you did not take a hand in this assault?"

"Nope, but I did want to take a fut in it. I'd given more'd two cents if I could kicked that chap."

"But you didn't?"

"Didn't git no chaince till it was all over."

"Then——"

"Waal, yeou see——'

Ephraim looked embarrassed.

Frank looked grave again.

"This is too much!" he declared. "I might have forgiven Hodge, but for you both to jump on the miserable wretch—well, I didn't think you would do it."

"Ephraim didn't touch Scudder while I was at him," Hodge hastened to declare.

"Honest Injun, I didn't!" said Gallup, hurriedly.

"But afterward—after Hodge had knocked the poor rascal down repeatedly—then you kicked him?"

"Waal, yeou see Hodge had soaked him in both eyes and knocked aout a tooth, while I hadn't even got one little teenty crack at him," explained Ephraim, dolefully.

Frank scowled.

"I am sorry," he said. "If Hodge had given the fellow a thrashing, I should have forgiven him; but for you both to assault him——"

"I warned Gallup to keep back and let me do it," said Bart.

"And didn't I keep back all the time yeou was thumpin' him?" exclaimed the Vermonter. "I never done a thing but holler, 'Thump him! soak him! punch him!' That warn't wrong, was it, Frank? I couldn't help hollerin' that an' larfin' to see Hodge do it."

"That was all right, but what did you do after Hodge finished?"

"Waal," confessed Ephraim, "Scudder scrambled past Bart on his hands an' knees arter he'd bin knocked daown five times, and then he up an' run aout past me inter the street. It was an awful good chaince, an' I couldn't help doin' of it. Jest as he went by on the jump I put boots to him, an' my old left foot made that jump of his kerry him more'n nine foot further than it would. It kainder h'isted his heels inter ther air, an' he come daown all sprawling. Larf! Why, I'd larfed ef I was dyin'! Oh, haw! haw! haw!"

Ephraim exploded again, being utterly unable to hold

in, and his laughter was infectious, for Frank joined in, despite all his efforts to keep from doing so.

Even Hodge smiled broadly.

"Well, Ephraim," said Frank, after a while, "I don't know that I blame you. It must have been an awful temptation as Scudder ran past."

"It was," Gallup hastened to say. "I done it before I knowed whut I was doin'. It was all over in a minute."

"What did Scudder do after that?"

"He got up as quick as he could, and yeou couldn't see him fer ther dust he kicked up goin' daown the street. He hollered blue murder till he was aout of sight."

"And then we came back here," said Bart.

"Well, I shall not say anything more to you about this affair," said Frank. "If you are arrested——"

"I didn't see northing," the Vermonter quickly declared. "I dunno haow Scudder's goin' to prove a darn thing."

"If he had no witnesses, he may not try it."

"Well, he had none," assured Hodge. "No one saw anything till he was out in the street, running for his life, and howling at the top of his lungs."

"I ruther guess he'll think he's bin monkeyin' with ther wrong folks araound here."

"But all this will not get Havener out of his fix," said Frank. "Come, Bart, we'll go get Cassie, and then we'll go to the lockup and have a talk with Havener."

Hodge followed Frank upstairs, and, in Elsie's room, they found the two girls.

Cassie had completely broken down, and Elsie was doing her best to cheer the little soubrette up.

"Oh, what's the use?" cried the unhappy girl. "Nothing is worth living for now!"

"Don't say that!" urged Elsie. "It will all come out right."

"No! It has come out all wrong—all wrong! This is the end! All my hopes are blasted. Oh, think of it! Think of the shame and disgrace of it!"

"It is not as bad as you think. When you have had time to think it over, you will see that it is not."

"You are saying that to comfort me, but you are wasting your breath. Why should I fight against my temptation now? It will make no difference if I take an overdose of the stuff! I shall go to sleep, and it will be better if I fail to wake up!"

Elsie cried out with horror, for she realized the desperate condition of the girl's mind. Once she, in utter despair, had stood on the brink of self-destruction, and now her very soul shuddered at the thought of what she had suffered then.

Frank and Bart paused at the door, which was a bit ajar. Elsie looked up and saw them, and she urged them to come in.

"Cassie," said Frank, quietly, "I trust you will not be foolish."

"Don't talk to me—don't talk like that!" screamed the girl, starting up, her eyes red from weeping and her face full of resentment. "I will do as I choose! I will kill that woman, and then I'll kill myself!"

"You have no right to do either," said Frank, calmly.

"Yes I have a right! She has come between me and Ross! She has wrecked our lives! If she lives, she will ruin and destroy him. I have a right to kill her! I will kill her! I swear I will kill her!"

Elsie shrank back, her hands clasped over her throbbing heart, while she stared in fascination at the infuriated girl.

Frank remained perfectly calm, but he closed the door, so that Cassie's excited words should not draw unwelcome listeners.

"You have a duty to Ross Havener, Cassie," he said.

"That is my duty," declared Cassie. "I shall do it."

"No; it is your duty to stand by him now, as he stood by you when you would add to his disgrace and assure his destruction. He has said that he could not and would not live without you. You are his anchor and his hope."

"I am nothing to him now! That wretched woman has come between us. She must be removed!"

"And the law must remove her. Stand by Havener now, and all will be well in the end. If you do something rash, you will destroy him, as well as yourself."

"That is true," said Hodge, solemnly.

Cassie was beginning to be impressed. She flung herself face downward on the bed and lay there some moments. All at once, she sat up and looked at Frank. A great change had come to her.

"It was you who told me of God!" she said, soberly. "You have always given me good advice, Frank. When

I have followed your advice I have never done wrong. I feel that I should follow your advice now. Tell me what to do—oh, tell me what to do!"

"I will, Cassie," he said. "I will tell you what I believe is best for you. Havener will be depressed when he finds himself alone in the lockup, and he, too, may become desperate. We will go to him, we will tell him that we'll not desert him. You can give him new hope and life. I'll tell him that Folansbee is doing everything in his power to get him out."

"But what if Folansbee gets him out? He'll still be bound to that woman!"

"Not for long. He will get clear of her when his case is brought up in the divorce courts."

"Who knows? This woman will swear to any sort of lie."

"But Havener has witnesses and evidence enough to win his case. This is but a temporary setback, and it will serve to make his triumph all the more certain in the end. Come, Cassie, shall we go to him?"

She got up from the bed.

"I will do whatever you say, Frank," she said. "I will trust everything to you."

"No one else could have brought her to her senses," thought Hodge. "It's wonderful what an influence Merriwell has over almost everybody."

So they went to see Havener, found him despondent, but left him more cheerful, for Cassie promised to stand by him to the end, no matter what happened.

The visit did the girl a great deal of good, and she said so on her way back to the hotel.

"You were right, Frank," she confessed. "For Ross' sake I must not do anything rash. He has been awfully good to me, and I'd be doing him dirt not to help him any way I can now. You needn't worry about me, Frank."

"I am glad to hear you say that, Cassie," Merry said, in relief. "Now I feel free to leave you and do what I can to get Havener out of the jail. I hope Folansbee has done something."

When the hotel was reached, he sought and found Parker Folansbee.

"I believe I have a man who will stand bail for Havener," said the backer of the company. "He will let me know within an hour."

Leslie Lawrence was hanging around. He seemed seeking an opportunity to speak to Frank, and yet he hesitated when the opportunity came.

Merry noticed this. He had not forgotten that Lawrence was his enemy, but he spoke to the man.

"What is it, Lawrence?" he asked.

Leslie cleared his throat.

"Pretty bad scrape," he said.

"Yes," nodded Merry; "but Havener must be gotten out of it."

"It would bother us if he wasn't?"

"I should say so! It would be a staggerer."

"And might knock us out completely?"

"Yes, it might," admitted Merry, who was wondering what the fellow was trying to say.

'I haven't any particular love for Havener," said Lawrence. "Still he's not a bad fellow."

"Havener is a man."

"Look here, Merriwell," said Lawrence, as if he had suddenly made up his mind to do something, "I believe I can get Havener out of this scrape."

Frank did not trust Lawrence, but still he was curious to know what sort of a game the fellow was playing.

"How can you get him out?" he asked.

"If I do the job, I presume you will give me credit for it?"

"Of course I will."

"All right. I've found where this woman who claims to be Havener's wife is stopping, and I'm going to call on her. I want you to go with me."

"So that is your game!" thought Merry. "There is some kind of a trap for me, and you want me to walk into it. I wonder how much you are paid to do the trick."

On second thought, however, Frank began to wonder why Lawrence should be concerned in such a scheme, for it was certain that Scudder could not remunerate the man, and the actor would be putting himself out of a good job by such an act.

Although these speculations flashed through Merry's mind in a moment, Lawrence seemd to read a doubt on the face of the young actor-playwright, and he hastened to say:

"This is on the level, Merriwell—I give you my word that it is. I suppose you have the best of reasons for doubting me, but you must acknowledge that I am not

fool enough to work against my own interests, and I should do that if I did you any damage now."

"But why do you wish me to accompany you on a visit to that woman?" asked Frank.

"So that you may hear whatever conversation takes place between us."

"Do you know her?"

"Yes."

"You did not speak to her when she came here."

"No. I do not think she recognized me. I didn't want her to, and so I kept in the background as much as possible. I also know the man who calls himself Philip Scudder."

"Who calls himself that! Isn't that his real name?"

"Not much."

"Then what is his name?"

"It is Preston Flack."

"Why does he call himself Scudder?"

"I am not aware of the real reason why he changed his name, but I think I can guess. He always was in crooked games, and it is probable that Preston Flack was 'wanted' for some kind of shady deal, so he became Philip Scudder."

"This is decidedly interesting!" exclaimed Frank. "Now if we knew just why he changed his name, we might put an end to his scheming."

"If you will accompany me, I think we'll put an end to it anyway."

"I will go," Frank decided. "Wait till I go up to my room and get my pistol. I may need it."

"I do not think you will," said Lawrence, "but it won't do any harm to carry it."

He did not attempt to persuade Frank not to take the weapon.

Merry ran upstairs. It seemed remarkable to him that Lawrence should come to his assistance at this time, but he had observed in the past that it is the unexpected that almost invariably happens in an emergency.

By this time he was convinced of the sincerity of Lawrence, but he knew there were some dangerous "dives" in Cripple Creek, and he fancied it would be well enough to take some precautions, and so, meeting Hodge, he stopped on the stairs to say:

"I am going out for a call, after getting my pistol, and I would like to have you follow me."

"Follow you?" questioned Bart, in surprise.

"Yes. I want you to do it without letting my companion become aware of the fact. Note where we go. If I disappear and do not show up as soon as you think I should, notify the chief of police."

"All right," nodded Bart.

He saw that Merry did not mean to say anything more, and he refrained from asking questions.

Frank ran upstairs, entered his room, secured his revolver, made sure it was loaded, and then hastened to join Lawrence in the office.

A minute later, this strange pair were walking down the street.

Hodge followed them.

CHAPTER VI.

BY WOMAN'S TONGUE.

The afternoon was on the wane.

"If anything is done for Havener to-day, it must be done in a hurry," said Frank, as he walked along by the side of Lawrence.

"That's just why I am taking you to make this call. It is the quickest way of doing something," declared the actor.

On their way, they met the chief of police.

"The very man we want," said Lawrence. "Officer, it will be worth your while to come with us."

"What's up?" asked the chief.

"You may have a chance to make two arrests," said the actor, not a little to Frank's surprise.

"Then I am with you."

Straight to a certain hotel in Cripple Creek proceeded the trio. They entered the parlor. At one side of the room was an alcove, which was curtained off by some heavy portières.

"I have been here before," explained Lawrence, "so I knew all about this place. This alcove suits my purpose. If you gentlemen will step in there behind the curtains, I think you will be able to hear something of interest in a short time."

The chief of police hesitated.

"What kind of business is this?" he asked. "I thought you brought me here to arrest somebody."

"So I did. If you do not make an arrest, I'll see to it that you are well paid for your trouble."

"But I don't fancy this kind of business."

"Here," said Frank, offering the officer a five-dollar bill, "this will pay you for your trouble whether you make an arrest or not."

The man hesitated, glanced around to make sure no one but Frank and Lawrence saw him, and then took the money and thrust it into his pocket, saying gruffly:

"Well, have the business over as soon as possible, for my time is valuable."

Then he and Frank stepped behind the curtains, which Lawrence had arranged to hide them effectually.

When this was done, the actor went to the office and requested that word be sent up to Mrs. Havener and Mr. Scudder that there was a gentleman in the parlor who wished to see them on important business.

Lawrence was not forced to wait long. There was a swish of skirts, and the woman came sailing into the parlor. He rose at once, advanced to meet her, and said:

"I am delighted to see you, my dear Mrs. Flack."

She stopped, as if turned to stone, and there she stood, staring at him.

"I think you have made a mistake, sir," she exclaimed, after a moment. "I am Mrs. Havener."

"You may have been Mrs. Havener at one time, or you may be that now, but you were Mrs. Flack," said Lawrence, coolly. "Don't you know me?"

"I am sure I do not!"

"I am sure you will, if you take a good look at me in a fair light. I was present at your wedding with Preston Flack seven years ago the nineteenth day of last month. I presume I have grown somewhat older, but you have aged scarcely a day. I would know you anywhere."

"Sir, you have made a great blunder. I—never—saw—you——"

She stopped, staring at him steadily. He laughed a little.

"Now you recognize me, Lottie," he said. "How is Pres.?"

"Good Lord!" she cried. "It's Leslie Bugby!"

"No," he declared, "not Leslie Bugby. Bugby is a plebeian name, and I am an actor now. My present name is Leslie Lawrence. Don't you think Lawrence sounds much better than Bugby?"

She laughed, catching the hand he held out to her.

"Why, if you're not the last person in the world I expected to see!" she cried. "Where have you been keeping yourself all these years?"

"Oh, I've been knocking around the world," answered Lawrence, offhand. "But how in the world did you happen to change your name to Havener? Did you do that because it sounds better than Flack?"

"Oh, no. You see I ran away from Pres. after we had been married a little over a year—got tired of him, you know. I struck a fellow by the name of Havener and tied to him."

"Oh, you were divorced from Pres.?"

"Divorced! Ha! ha! ha! Well, hardly! I didn't take the trouble! Too much bother, you know."

Lawrence laughed.

"Oh, I understand. This Havener was a good thing, and you froze to him. The marriage was a sham?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I was on my uppers. Times were hard, and I had to pull through somehow. Havener was a soft thing. He fell head over heels in love with me. It was near the end of the season, and I didn't have anything for the summer. He had a snug little roll in bank. He said hitch, and we hitched."

"Lottie, you are a merry one!" cried Lawrence, with real or pretended admiration. "I shouldn't have thought you would dare."

"Oh, what was there to dare? Pres. got to being pretty gay before I quit him, and I knew he wouldn't make much of a kick if he got onto it. I pulled his leg for all I could while I stuck to him, and I knew I couldn't go back to him, so I just hitched up to this man Havener."

"And you were not in the least afraid of being brought up for bigamy? Well, you take the first prize! But what did you do with Havener?"

"Skipped him when I had wrung him dry, same as I skipped Pres. He was a regular goody-good. He stuck around me all the time, and never gave me a chance to have any sport. I believe he would have settled down into a staid, old family man if I had stuck by him and permitted him to do so."

"But how does it happen that you are here with Pres.? I saw you with him, you know."

"Oh, I've been living with him some since I left Havener. You know he was soft to start with, for you and I pulled him into the marriage; but he's out for dust now, first, last and all the time. He's forever working schemes. That's why he changed his name to Scudder. He's wanted as Flack in Chicago for a little piece of business. He had to scud, and so he became a Scudder. Ha! ha! ha! Well, Leslie, old fellow, I'm dead glad to see you! Pres. said he would come down as soon as he got fixed up."

"Fixed up? I hope he isn't changing his clothes?"

"No; he's patching up his face."

"Patching his face! What happened to him?"

"We've been working a little game here in Cripple Creek. He has it in for a chap named Frank Merriwell, who is starring in this 'John Smith' piece, and we've had Havener, who was his stage manager, arrested for bigamy. Think of that! I appeared as the deserted wife, and we nipped the fellow just as he was about to hitch up to another girl. It was rough on him, but Pres. said he'd get at Merriwell by putting Havener in the jug, so we worked the riffle. Poor Havener! Think of jailing the poor fellow for bigamy when he was never legally married to me in the world!"

The woman went off into convulsions of loud laughter.

Behind the curtains Frank Merriwell found it difficult to hold himself in restraint. His exultation knew no bounds.

Havener was not married to the woman! The ceremony had not been legal! He was free to marry Cassie!

It is safe to say that the chief of police was somewhat surprised by what he heard.

"But that don't explain why Pres. is fixing up his face," said Lawrence.

"Oh, a gang of Merriwell's friends got at him and knocked the stuffing out of him. They did him up beautifully! Gave him a pair of black eyes, knocked two teeth out, and damaged him otherwise. He is a holy spectacle. Here he comes."

Philip Scudder, badly battered and damaged, entered the room.

"Here, Pres.," said the woman, "don't you know your old friends? This is Leslie Bugby. We have been talking over matters, and I've been telling him all about our little racket here."

"Bugby!" cried Scudder. "Well, I'm glad to see you, old man. But you people should not talk over things here. Somebody might hear you, and that would be a scrape!"

"Oh—we—we're all alone," laughed the adventuress. "Not a soul but ourselves heard a word we said."

"You are very much mistaken."

Frank Merriwell was the speaker, and he stood between the parted curtains.

The woman uttered a scream, and her husband gave vent to an oath.

"We have heard enough to place you both behind the bars!" declared Merriwell, in a ringing voice, as he stepped out, followed by the uniformed chief of police.

"Confound you!" cried Scudder, pale and shaking. "The jig's up!"

"Yes, you rascal!" cried Frank; "your game is played out, and you have lost just when you thought you had won. The cell that holds Roscoe Havener now will soon open to receive you! Officer, do not let them escape!"

An hour later Havener was free. The man was bewildered beyond measure when he learned that he had never been legally married to the woman he supposed his wife. It was joyous news for him, however, for he was free—free to marry Cassie.

But Scudder and his wife were let go on condition that they would get out of the place at the first opportunity and would never again molest Havener or Merriwell. Havener had no time then to prosecute the man or woman, even if he was inclined to do so.

Scudder remained sullen. In parting with Frank, he said:

"You got the best of me in this deal, Merriwell, but I'm onto something that you know nothing of yet. The hand of the law will stop your career. You will not get out of Cripple Creek with your old show."

CHAPTER VII.

NEVER DOWNED.

Frank thought this the last despairing bluff of the man, but he found out differently later on, for, before sunset, he was served with an injunction to prevent him from playing "John Smith" in Cripple Creek.

Joseph Arthur was the complainant, through his agent, Randolph Weston, whom Frank had seen that day in the office of Norton Downs, the justice.

Weston served papers on Merriwell, forbidding him to play the piece in Cripple Creek or elsewhere, and setting forth a long list of causes for the action.

Frank studied the paper carefully. Everything in it was sworn to, of course, and from it he learned that Joseph Arthur's piece had been copyrighted and produced before "John Smith," and that the play contained a sawmill scene that was almost exactly like the one in Frank's piece. This arrangement was protected by patent by Arthur, and Frank could be prosecuted for infringing on his rights.

Randolph Weston stated that Arthur would not prosecute if Merry would withdraw his play and sign an agreement not to play in it again or permit it to be played by others.

Of course Frank would not sign such an agreement till he was certain he would not be throwing away his own

rights by doing so. He asked for time and was given until the next day.

But the Grand at Cripple Creek was dark that night, and a multitude of disappointed people were turned away, while those who had bought seats in advance received their money back at the box office.

The calamity that Frank had feared and dreaded for some time had fallen at last.

That evening Merry received a note from Scudder, delivered by a boy. This was what he read:

"How do you feel about it now? Didn't I tell you that you had reached the end of your rope? I happened to be around to hear a few things in the office of Norton Downs this noon, and I knew Weston meant to jump you tonight. I wanted a hand in the game, to make doubly sure of you, and so I worked the job I had planned against Havener. I thought I might be able to make a dollar out of that, too. I failed to make anything, but I have the satisfaction of knowing that your career as a star is over. You got the best of me in St. Louis, but I was in at the death and witnessed your downfall. I am satisfied.

"PHILIP SCUDDER."

The people of Merriwell's company were a despondent lot that night, with the possible exceptions of Havener and Cassie. Of course they felt bad for Frank, but the happiness that had come to them seemed to overshadow everything else.

Bart and Ephraim found Frank in his room, still studying the papers that had been served on him.

"Come in," he called, almost cheerfully, in answer to their knock.

They entered. Bart stood with his hands in his pockets, while Ephraim dropped down on the bed. Both looked blue.

"Well, boys, what is it?" asked Merry.

"It's a shame!" exploded Hodge. "That's what it is if you've got to quit with this piece! But you are not going to quit, are you?"

"Yes, Hodge," nodded Frank, "I find I must. Everything is set forth plainly here, and I find that Joseph Arthur got ahead of me. It is hard luck, but I've got to lay down."

"Well, that is tough!"

"Gol darned ef it ain't!" snuffled Ephraim. "It makes me humsick! I wish I was to hum on the farm, b'gosh!"

"What will you do, Frank?" asked Bart, anxiously.

"I haven't decided yet," was the answer; "but you do not want to forget that I have been making plans for this for some time."

"But your career as the star of one of the best plays on the road is ended. Oh, it's bum!"

"It suttainly is!" agreed Ephraim. "I never thought I'd make much of a go on the staige, but by jimminy! I seemed to do fust rate in that piece. Naow, I expect I'll hev to stop an' go to hustlin' fer my feed and clothes."

"I had hoped to be able to work for you, Frank," said Bart, "and earn enough to pay my debts at college."

"Don't let those debts worry you, Hodge," smiled Merry. "They are paid—every one of them."

"What?" exploded Bart, in amazement—"what's that?"

"Those debts are paid," said Frank, quietly.

"How are they paid?"

"I paid them."

"You?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"When Browning returned to Yale. You know I offered to let you have the money to pay every cent you owed?"

"Yes."

"You refused it."

"Of course I did!"

"Well, I was determined that your record should be cleared, and, without your consent, I sent the money by Browning to pay every debt. I have your I. O. U.'s here."

Frank took some strips of paper from his pocketbook and passed them to Bart, who took them and stood staring at them in a dazed way for some moments.

"You had no right to do this!" Hodge finally exploded, his eyes flashing.

"There, old chum," smiled Merry, rising and putting an arm round Bart, "hold it down to-night. I am sure you will not be angry with me now. I think I have enough to shoulder."

Bart melted instantly.

"Oh, Frank!" he cried, "why were you so foolish? Now see what you have done! You had that much toward getting back to Yale, but it is gone, and your career is ended."

"The money is gone," said Frank, "but your debts are

paid, Hodge. My career is not ended. I have made one success as a playwright, and I can make another. I have a play well blocked out, and I shall rush it through to completion. Parker Folansbee will back it, and we will have it on the road in a hurry. It has no mechanical effect in it, like the sawmill scene, but I think it will be a winner just the same. Oh, I am still in the ring."

"Will yeou hev a part for me in the new play, Frank?" eagerly asked Gallup.

"I shall have parts for both of you, written with the express idea of fitting you. If you stick by me, we'll soon be on the road again. I have saved enough to pay the fares of the members of the company from here to Denver. There I will make some arrangement with them and start to work on my new play."

"We will stay with you, Frank," said Bart, heartily.

"Will we stick by yeou?" cried Ephraim, excitedly. "Waal, I jest guess we will. Hooray for Frank Merriwell!"

With his two admirers, Frank went down to the parlor and explained to the members of the company that "John Smith" was withdrawn. He offered them all transportation to Denver and hinted that he might have a proposition for their consideration after he had talked matters over with Mr. Folansbee.

The next day the company started for Denver.

Leslie Lawrence was the only one who gave Frank any trouble. He seemed to think he was deserving of some special consideration because he had exposed the villain, Scudder.

That matter did not present itself in such a light to Frank, and he made his views pretty plain to Lawrence.

Accordingly, when the train arrived in the station at Denver, Lawrence left in a huff.

All the rest of the company went to the American Hotel and a couple of days after their arrival Frank asked them to gather in the parlor.

"My friends," said Frank, speaking to the gathering—"I hope I may address you as my friends—I have called you together here for the purpose of bidding you one and all good-by and good luck. I want to shake hands with you all."

He stood in the center of the room and looked around him. At that moment he was struck by the intelligent and respectable appearance made by the collected company. They did not look like a lot of "hamfatters" who had been barn-storming, but they were well dressed, and, just then, at least, had the air of gentlemen and ladies.

"To you, my friends," Frank immediately went on, "I believe is due a liberal amount of credit for the success of my unfortunate play, 'John Smith of Montana,' which I have been forced to withdraw in order to escape a law-suit with Joseph Arthur."

"It's an imposition!" muttered Basil Holt, who played heavies. "I don't believe his play is at all like 'John Smith.'"

"In certain respects it is like my piece," confessed Frank. "The plot of 'John Smith' is entirely different from that of 'Blue Jeans,' but the vital point of my piece is the sawmill scene, and that is also the feature of

Arthur's play. I never saw 'Blue Jeans,' and I knew nothing about the sawmill scene in it when I wrote my play. Mr. Arthur's agent convinced me that Mr. Arthur was in the field ahead of me, and I saw that I must stop or face an expensive lawsuit, with everything in favor of being defeated and finding myself forced to pay heavy damages.

"My best judgment told me to stop at once, and so here we are, ready to part. Again I say that, whatever success 'John Smith' has won, it was due in no small measure to the people I see around me—the people who interpreted the parts. It takes brains and ability to act by those who are cast for the characters of a play in order to make the piece a success, no matter how good it may be.

"We have seen very little hard luck till the final blow came. 'John Smith' was a success from the start, and I believe it would have made a barrel of money for Mr. Folansbee and myself had we not been forced to withdraw it.

"Mr. Folansbee I wish to mention in particular right now. I have found him a thorough gentleman, and, surprising to relate, we have never had any serious disagreements over anything. Of course, we have not always thought alike on everything, but we have invariably been able to agree in the end. He furnished the money for this venture, and, for his sake, I am very sorry that we met with disaster. However, I do not think he has come out far behind."

"Don't worry about me," put in the backer of the company. "I have lost twice as much in one night at a game of poker as I lost in this deal. I'm getting out easy."

"Under the arrangement between Mr. Folansbee and myself," continued Merry, "I made something, but almost every dollar I made I spent in paying honest debts."

He did not say whose honest debts, and Bart Hodge moved restlessly on his chair, knowing that more than six hundred dollars of Merry's money had been sent to New Haven by Bruce Browning, for the purpose of taking up Bart's I. O. U.'s in that place.

"However," Frank went on, "I had enough left to bring you all on here to Denver, and now I am authorized by Mr. Folansbee to inform you that he will purchase tickets for each and all of you to New York, Chicago, or to your homes, as you may choose. All contracts will be canceled here to-day."

There was a stir. The rather dejected-looking people brightened up. Douglas Dunton sprang to his feet, crying:

"Now that's what I call white! I fain would embrace Mr. Folansbee's generous offer and avail myself of the opportunity to flee from this land to the Rialto. In the warbled words of the immortal John T. Kelly, 'little old New York, my boys, is good enough for me.' And I think there are others."

"Well, I should guess yes!" exclaimed Lilian Bird, with utter unconsciousness that she was using slang. "Oh, for the sight of Broadway!"

"Say, that'll be getting home!" declared Waterman Wolfe. "Why, the moment I land at the Grand Central Station, I feel that I am back in God's country. It's no

use, a man never feels the same anywhere else as he does in New York."

"Or a woman either," put in Lilian Bird. "I know some jolly good people at home, and I won't be in town long before some of the crowd will have to blow me off to a feed at Shanley's. Oh, my!"

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Roscoe Havener, rising, "I think it is our duty to express our thanks to both Parker Folansbee and Frank Merriwell."

"Me, too!"

"Same here!"

"I'm another!"

"Count me in!"

"They're all right!"

Everybody seemed eager to express gratitude.

"I have been in the profession for years," Havener went on, "and never have I had dealings with a squarer man than Frank Merriwell, or one I believed more bright and capable. In fact, having known him since he entered the ranks, I will say that his success is something utterly beyond my comprehension. He seemed to take to everything theatrical as a duck takes to water. He has business ability, as well as literary ability, and the combination in one person is rather rare. He knows how to construct a good play, and he also knows how to act the star part in it. Further, he knows how to treat everybody with whom he is associated in a gentlemanly manner. I am sorry that my engagement with this gentlemen is over, and I hope to have another engagement with him in the future."

"Just now you have an engagement with me," laughed Cassie Lee, softly.

"And Frank Merriwell is entirely responsible for that," declared Havener, sitting down beside her.

Just then a bell boy appeared and said:

"Mr. Merriwell, a gentleman below insists on seeing you at once. He was informed that you were busy, but he said that made no difference. He wouldn't give his name, but told me to say 'John Smith and Blue Jeans' to you, and you would come down."

"It must be somebody who knows something about this affair," said Merry. "Yes, I'll go down and see him, but I'll come back in a few moments. Wait for me."

He followed the boy.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN ANGRY ACTOR.

Down in the office a man was swaggering around, chewing a half-smoked cigar and wearing a silk hat tipped on the side of his head at a rakish angle. His face was flushed and his eyes bloodshot. About his beardless face there was that indefinable look that plainly stamped him an actor.

"Hello, it's Lawrence!" muttered Frank, and then he advanced to meet the man, whom the bell boy had pointed out.

Lawrence saw him, attempted to turn sharply to meet him, and, in doing so, staggered a bit.

"How do you do, Lawrence," said Merry, quietly. "Did you want to see me?"

"Yes, I did," was the savage answer. "I sent for you. Didn't send up my name, because I knew you wouldn't come down if I did."

"Well, I am here."

Frank's quiet manner seemed to enrage the half-intoxicated actor still more.

"Yes, I see you are!" he snarled. "Now, I want to know what you are going to do?"

"About what?"

"The contract I hold with you."

"I am not going to do anything about it. To begin with,

you do not hold any contract with me; it is with Mr. Folansbee."

"Oh, so that's the way you get out of it? But I know, and everybody else knows, that you were the real manager of the company. Folansbee was the angel. You are the man I'm going to deal with. I hold a contract, and you are going to do something."

"The contract is valueless to you, for you broke it yourself. After your first trouble with us, you skipped out without leave. When you came back and ate humble pie, knowing you were dead broke and in a bad place, I took you back; but your contract was not renewed. I have treated you as well as I could—as well as you would allow. I have treated you better than you deserved. Wait! I am speaking! Don't interrupt me, sir! I brought you to Denver with the rest of the company. You were treated exactly the same as others."

"And that was shabby! I want money to pay my fare to New York, and you've got to fork over. If you don't——"

"What then, sir?"

"I'll sue you!" grated Lawrence.

Frank smiled a bit.

"Go ahead, Lawrence," he advised, quietly.

"Then you refuse—then you are going to drop us here? That is a dirty trick! After getting us out into this country, hundreds of miles from home, you drop us! And I suppose you call yourself a man! Well, I'll tell you what I think of you——"

"Take my advice, don't do it. You might get hurt."

Frank was looking the fellow straight in the eyes. Lawrence hesitated. His dealings with Merriwell convinced him that there were times when Frank was decidedly dangerous, despite his agreeable manner and coolness.

"It's shabby, Merriwell!" muttered Lawrence. "You have no right to bring us out here and drop us!"

"I have dropped nobody. You dropped yourself, Mr. Lawrence. Why didn't you come to the American with the others when we reached Denver? I told you to come here, the same as I told the others."

"And did you think I'd run around after you like a puppy? I'm no dog to tag along at your heels, Merriwell! I didn't come here with the others because I didn't care to be seen with such a lot of hamfatters and bum actors. I am a gentleman, even if I did find it necessary to go out with a third-rate company and play in a fourth-rate play."

"You may be a gentleman, Lawrence, but I've never seen any signs of it."

A snarl came from the actor's lips, and he looked as if he longed to strike Frank, but it was plain that he did not dare to do so.

"That's all right!" he explained. "I'll make you wish you hadn't said it! You can't talk to me like that!"

"You have forced me to use plain language. I have treated you far better than you deserve, Lawrence, and you know it. Not many men would have been so easy with you. You have associated with rascals so long that

you do not appreciate what I have done. Take warning by the fate that befell Percy Lockwell."

"That's one thing I wanted to speak about. You were responsible for what happened to poor Lockwell. You didn't use the fellow right in the first place."

"I confess it."

"Hah! You do?"

"Yes. I should not have had anything to do with him in the first place. I recognized him as a rascal the first time I saw him, and I made a mistake by taking him into the company. He was the friend of Philip Scudder, the crook, whose real name is Preston Flack. I made a mistake in not prosecuting Scudder in St. Louis. I let him off for the sake of his wife, whom I had never seen; and his wife turned up later on, to make no end of trouble for my stage manager. But Scudder's case is settled now, and he has been shown up as a crook from start to finish. I hardly think you can be pleased by the record made by your friends in their attempts to injure me, and it seems to me that you should take warning by what has happened to them."

"Oh, you needn't talk about them! I didn't come here for that. I came here to find out what you are going to do about getting us out of this country."

"I have just been informing the others of the company that their fares would be paid to New York or to their homes."

"Oh, well, that's different! Now you are talking! I thought you would come to it!"

"If you had come along to the hotel, you would have been included in the offer."

Lawrence caught his breath, and it seemed to take some moments for him to understand Frank's meaning.

"Then I suppose by that you leave me out? I am not to be treated the same as the others?"

"You saw fit to take yourself away from the others, and so my offer did not include you. There was no reason why I should make you such an offer, anyhow, as you broke your contract. All the same, I had intended to treat you as the others."

"But now——"

"Now, Mr. Lawrence, I shall leave you to get to New York, or wherever you wish to go, as best you may."

Frank half turned, as if to leave the office. Lawrence shot out a hand to grasp him by the shoulder, but Merry whirled back swiftly and the actor's fingers did not touch him.

"By the Lord Harry!" hissed Lawrence, his face fairly purple with anger; " you shall pay for this! I'll make you sorry!"

"Go ahead!" said Frank, quietly. "I have treated you too well in the past, and now I am done with you."

"No, you are not done with me! If you think you are, you will find out your mistake! I'll know if you can use me this way, Merriwell! I am not the crazy fool that Percy Lockwell was, but I can find a way to hurt you —some time! If you want me to let you alone, give me the money to get to New York. Otherwise——"

"I am tired of listening to your threats, Lawrence. If

you have an idea that you can drive me by such talk, you have made the greatest mistake of your life. Do you think I will hire you to let me alone by paying your fare to New York? If you have such a notion in your head, get rid of it. It is a very poor way to get anything from me. I am rather obstinate when aroused, and I must confess that you have started me somewhat. I have a few final words to say to you. In the past I have put up with a good deal from you. In the future I shall stand very little. If you bother me, you must take the consequences."

Lawrence was not so intoxicated that he could not understand that he had made a mistake; but the knowledge that he had blundered made him still more angry, and now he used language that would not look well in print.

"Oh, stand there and stare at me!" he ended. "Who cares? It's all right! You'll find that I mean business, and you'll be sorry!"

That was all he could say.

"Have you finished?" asked Merry, calmly.

"Yes! It's all right—all right!"

Frank turned his back squarely on the fellow and walked out of the office.

Lawrence watched him till he disappeared, and then he began to swear fiercely.

A man came up and touched him on the shoulder, saying, sternly:

"That will do! Such language cannot be used here. Please be quiet, or leave the hotel at once."

"Oh, I'll leave your old hotel!" snarled Lawrence. "You can go straight to——"

He did not complete the final sentence. Something told him it would not be wise, and he turned and hastened from the hotel, muttering as he went.

Frank went back to the parlor, and not a word did he say about Lawrence. He found the actors and actresses chatting and laughing. They did not appear like a disbanded and dejected company.

"Here he is!" cried Lilian Bird, as Frank entered. "Now say it to his face—if you dare!"

"We have decided," said Havener, "to offer you and Mr. Folansbee a vote of thanks for the white manner in which you have treated us. Not one of us has a word of complaint to make, and every one of us is sorry that our engagement with you has come to an end so suddenly and in such an untimely manner."

"You are very kind," smiled Merry. "Let me tell you that the expenses of everyone will be paid at the hotel till noon to-morrow, if they care to stay here."

"Stay!" exclaimed Douglas Dunton. "Methinks we will! I don't see anything the matter with this hotel; especially after some of the hasheries we have struck on the road."

"There is another matter I wish to mention," said Frank. "All of you may not know that I am writing a new play. I have it pretty well along. Every act is blocked out, and some of the strongest scenes are written up."

"We knew you were pegging away at something all

your spare time," said Holt. "Is it another piece like 'John Smith'?"

"'John Smith' was a comedy drama, and the new play is also a comedy drama, but that is the only way in which they are alike."

"Then it isn't a Western piece?"

"No, it is located in the East. It is a college play."

"A college play?"

"Yes. In it I have described a life with which I am familiar, the life at Yale."

"Four acts?"

"Yes."

"What do you call it?"

"I haven't given it a name yet, though I am thinking of calling it, 'For Old Eli.'"

"Who's Old Eli?" asked Hattie Harrison.

Frank laughed.

"Eli—Yale. The college was named for 'Old Eli,' you know."

"Now I understand the origin of the expression, 'get there, Eli,'" declared Waterman Wolfe. "Yale men usually have a way of getting there. Do you think your new play will be equal to 'John Smith'?"

"I have a hope that it will be better. I am pretty certain that it will be constructed better, for I know how to work at it better than I did at my first one. I am sure the literary construction will be better."

"I suppose you hope to get it on the road next season?" said Holt.

"I hope to get it on the road before next season."

"What? How?"

"I do not intend to delay. I have been talking the matter over with Mr. Folansbee, and he is ready to back the company."

"Methinks, perchance, thou hast ambitions to pick up another and better company of players?" questioned Douglas Dunton.

"That is a matter I wish to speak of, also. I think there are parts for nearly all of you, if you wish to wait here in Denver till the piece is ready for you to go out. Of course, you will be taking chances, for it may prove a fizzle, and the season may not be very long. Still, if any of you wish to chance it with me, you may come to me later, and we will talk it over. Those who do not wish to chance it shall have their fares paid to wherever they wish to go. I believe that is all you can ask."

"It's too kind!" exclaimed Hattie Harrison.

"That is all I have to say, friends," finished Frank. "I shall be in my room from three to five this afternoon. Those who wish to go East should find out about fares, and so forth, and call to let me know what they wish."

All crowded about Frank and shook hands with him, expressing again their appreciation of his generosity.

In a little while, Frank, Bart, Ephraim and Elsie were left in the parlor.

"What do you think of the idea for my new play, Hodge?" asked Merriwell.

"It doesn't strike me as being anything great," was the

frank answer. "It may prove all right, but I have my doubts."

"Gol darn it!" cried Gallup; "yeou're allus daoubtin' ev'rything! I think it's a rattlin' good idee, Frank, though yeou didn't ask me."

"I am obliged to your opinion, even if I did not ask you," smiled Merry; "and I am likewise obliged to Hodge. I'd rather he would say just what he thought than to have him prevaricate to please me; but I am curious to know why he thinks the idea is not a good one."

"Well, I think such a play will appeal to a limited audience."

"Why limited? Surely it should appeal to college men and college graduates everywhere."

"It might appeal to Yale men, but surely it would not to Yale's rivals. Of course, you will have Yale always a winner in everything, and that will not satisfy Harvard or Princeton men, to say nothing of Pennsylvania, Cornell and others."

"That is good logic, but, my dear fellow, I mean to make the play of general interest, outside its college features. At the same time, I believe it can be built so that it will not offend Harvard or Princeton graduates."

"Perhaps so. I don't want to croak, but I do not believe you will turn out another 'John Smith.' That play was right. It appealed to all classes. It's hero was a plain, unassuming fellow who was a natural nobleman, and such characters awaken sympathy."

"I shall endeavor to make my college hero just such a

plain, unassuming fellow. I do not think the real college man has been done on the stage."

"No, I reckon not. College chaps in plays are apt to be like anything but the real article. In most cases, they are represented by vaudeville performers—fellows who can sing, dance and turn flip-flaps, but who never saw the inside of a college."

"Sure thing, Hodge."

"And the way they pronounce their words—well, in two cases out of three they are likely to have a Bowery dialect."

Frank laughed.

"Perhaps not as bad as that, but they show that they are fakes."

"It will be a novelty, at least," admitted Hodge, "to see a college play, written by a college man, with the hero acted by a college man, for I suppose you intend to star in your new piece."

"I am writing it with that end in view."

"Well, I won't say anything more about it till I have read it or seen it."

"Be yeou goin' to have a part for me in that air play, Frank?" anxiously asked Gallup.

"Yes."

"But I ain't no college man, and I know I've got a reg'lar daown East twang in my voice. I might go to skule ten year, but I couldn't shake off the Yankee."

"Oh, I don't intend to have all my characters college men, Ephraim. That would spoil the play. I am going

to introduce various characters, Yankee, Dutch and so forth."

"Well, I'm darn glad of that," nodded the Vermonter, in relief. "I've got inter this air actin', an' I ruther like it, b'gosh!"

"And Elsie—I have another good part for her," said Frank.

Elsie, looking pale and weary, shook her head.

"I shall not be able to fill it, Frank," she declared.

"Nonsense!" Merry cried. "Of course you will! Why, you must! You made one of the biggest hits in the other play, and I must have you in the new one."

"I must rest, Frank—I must! My terrible experience in Ace High was too much. I cannot forget it. I think of it days—I dream of it nights! Oh, those horrible men!"

A look of anxiety came to Frank's face.

"You shall have a rest," he said, tenderly. "It will be some little time before the play is ready for rehearsing, and you will be all right then."

"Perhaps so, but I'm afraid not. I am going back to Pittsburg."

"Back to Pittsburg?" Merry cried, in astonishment. "You cannot be in earnest, Elsie? Why should you go there?"

"I have some friends in Pittsburg, and I shall stop with them. You must let me go, Frank."

"Now, look here," he said, walking over to her and taking her hands, "I want to know if you are trying to run away from me."

Hodge motioned to Gallup, and they slipped out of the parlor, leaving Frank and Elsie together.

"Oh, of course, I am not trying to run away!" said the girl, quickly. "How foolish of you to think such a thing, Frank!"

"I don't know," he said, slowly. "You tried to run away from me at Blair, and that is how you happened to fall into the hands of those ruffians at Ace High. If I had not followed——"

"If you had not followed, something terrible would have become of me—I know it, Frank. But for you I think I should have gone stark mad when I was thrown into that dark cellar."

"You have such queer notions, Elsie! Now, I am sure you are trying to get away from me. What have I done that you should treat me so?"

"Oh, nothing nothing!" she exclaimed, wearily. "You are always kind and noble, Frank! It is not you——"

"Then it is another. I can guess who. But she is not here now, Elsie. I am sorry there should be such a misunderstanding between you and Inza, but——"

"Please, Frank! I don't wish to speak of her. It hurts me to think of her!"

"And I believe that is wearing on you, Elsie. This misunderstanding between you was a terrible blunder."

Elsie was silent, her head bowed.

In truth, Frank had hit the principal cause of the girl's paleness and depression. Elsie's conscience was troubling her. She had not forgotten the old days when she and Inza were such friends. She had not forgotten all the

merry times they had enjoyed together. She had not forgotten Inza's affection and kindness. Nor had she forgotten how in Blair she had told Inza that she hated her, and that was wearing on her conscience. She felt that she was in the wrong, she felt she had not treated Inza right, and it was worrying her.

Elsie was a girl with a conscience, and now her conscience was making her ill.

Somehow Frank divined all this, but he could not just say the words he wished to speak, for he realized that Elsie might not understand them in the right light. She might think he was chiding or reproving her, and that would add to her suffering.

"Oh, it will be all right in the end, little girl," assured Merry, in an endeavor to soothe her. "Inza will not cherish any enmity against you."

That was the worst thing he could have said.

"I should feel better if I knew she would!" cried Elsie. "If she would really and truly hate me, then I—— Oh, no, no, Frank. Let's talk of something else. We shall not be together long. You will be busy this afternoon, and I shall go away to-morrow."

"Not if I can help it," he mentally vowed.

But he permitted her to change the subject, and they enjoyed a short chat about other matters.

When, at last, Elsie went to her room, she locked herself in and walked the floor a long time. She flung open the window and leaned out to get some fresh air. Being on the front of the hotel, she could look down into the street below, teeming with life, bustling, hustling with

the rush and go characteristic of the chief city of Colorado.

A sudden giddiness seized her, and she felt herself slipping over the window sill. A thought flashed through her brain. It would be an accident if she fell, and she would be killed by the fall. Then she would be out of the way forever, and there would be no obstacle between Frank and Inza.

Then her strength came back to her in a moment. She grasped the window casing and drew herself back. Calmly she closed the window, not even trembling from her moment of peril.

"No," she said, "I will live. I was a coward to even think of such a thing for one instant."

CHAPTER IX.

A WAGER.

Of course Hodge and Gallup did not contemplate leaving Frank if it was possible to remain with him. Of the others, Havener, Cassie Lee and Douglas Dunton were the only ones who decided to remain. The others chose to accept Frank's offer to pay their fares to whatever points they selected. Havener, Cassie and Dunton decided to stay in Denver, and Frank made arrangements with them to take parts in the new play. This gave him particular satisfaction, for he realized that he could not get a better man than Havener to stage the piece.

Folansbee had talked over the plot of the new play with Frank, and he agreed that it should prove a success, and was ready to back the company. He expressed a conviction, however, that the piece would not be as popular on the road as "John Smith" had been, because it would not be provided with a "mechanical effect," like the sawmill scene, to produce a sensation. Frank believed that it could be made just as drawing in other ways. As for effects, in the first act he was to have a shipwreck take place off the stage, in the midst of a thunderstorm, with accompanying excitement on the stage.

The booming of the ship's gun was to be heard, and sailors and life-savers were to appear, the finale to be a tableau in which the star appeared bearing the heroine, whom he had rescued from the sea. If this was properly

worked up and handled, he believed it would prove very effective.

The conclusion of the third act was to be a boat race between Yale, Harvard and Cornell, with Yale the winner, of course. This was to be handled as if it were taking place off the stage out of sight of the audience. The scene was to be the interior of the Yale boathouse, and several characters were to keep track of the progress of the race.

At the end, the star, who had rowed the race with a felon on his hand, was to be brought on by his admiring companions, having fainted the moment the race was over and won.

Folansbee decided to take a run on to St. Louis during the brief time before they took hold of the new play in earnest. As he was not going till the next day, he started out to look Denver over.

That evening at supper he asked Frank if he would like to go down to a certain sporting club, where a famous billiard player was to give an exhibition of his skill that night.

Merry was very fond of billiards, and nothing delighted him more than such exhibitions, so he quickly accepted the invitation.

"I met a friend here," Folansbee explained, "and he gave me the invitation. He told me to bring along any of my friends, so you may take somebody else with you, Merriwell, if you choose."

Frank invited Bart, and, about nine o'clock, they started out, picking up Folansbee's friend on the way.

"This fellow who gives the exhibition is a queer customer," Folansbee explained. "He is known as 'The Snake Charmer.'"

"Why do they call him that?" asked Merry.

"Well, for two reasons. One is that he can make a billiard ball cut all kinds of curves on a table. It is said a snake would break its back trying to follow the ball."

"And the other reason?"

"He is a genuine snake charmer. He has a queer notion that snakes bring him luck, and it is said that he carries two or three of them around with him constantly."

"He must be a crank."

"He is peculiar."

"What's his name?"

"He calls himself Paoli Maletus."

"A queer name. What nationality is he?"

"Nobody knows."

"Well, you have aroused my curiosity in this man," Frank remarked, laughing. "I am eager to see him."

The exhibition took place in the largest and most fashionable sporting club in Denver. All kinds of games were running, but they made their way directly to the billiard room.

The man who was to give the exhibition had not arrived.

"Do you play billiards, Merriwell?" asked Folansbee.

"Occasionally," answered Frank.

"Then we might have a game while we are waiting. Here is an idle table. What do you say?"

"I am willing."

They were provided with cues, and then Folansbee said:

"I suppose I'll have to give you something in order to make it even, as I am something of a billiard crank. I have played the game a great deal. Will a discount be enough?"

"Anything goes," answered Merry, quietly.

Something like a grim smile crept around the corners of Bart Hodge's mouth. He did not say anything, but he was thinking that Parker Folansbee was pretty certain to meet with a great surprise, unless Merry was quite out of practice. Frank was a natural billiard player, and Hodge knew that some professionals were not in his class when he was at his best.

Frank and Folansbee strung for the lead, and Parker won. He led off with a fancy shot, taking two cushions in the corner first, then coming back and hitting the two balls that lay on the spots. Frank knew this was not a sure shot, but it was very handsome when it worked right, and he clapped his hands in applause.

Handling his cue in a dainty manner, Folansbee calmly ran off thirteen points, and then missed on a bank shot.

"Thirteen is an unlucky number, you know," smiled Merry, as he chalked his cue and prepared to shoot.

"It might be under some circumstances," admitted Parker, who plainly thought he had a snap.

Frank examined the position in which the balls lay, and found that he could easily get his first shot by taking

a single cushion, but he hesitated over it as he saw it would leave the balls spread when he had made the shot.

"That's easy," said Folansbee.

Merry saw that a rather difficult draw might give him a good position for the next shot, and he decided to attempt the draw. He tried it, drew the ball beautifully, but missed the second object ball by a "red hair."

"Well, you should have had it," said Parker, as he prepared to go at them again.

He fancied the shot was easy, and that caused him to miss from overconfidence, but with perfect good breeding, he refrained from giving expression to annoyance.

Once more Merry resorted to the draw, and this time he made it beautifully, bringing the balls together.

Hodge looked on in satisfaction.

Frank worked the balls along the rail toward the corner, making shot after shot with deliberation, ease and confidence. By the time he had made a dozen, he had them in the corner, and Parker Folansbee was watching him with growing surprise and a dawning realization of the fact that Frank was no ordinary player.

"Are there any rules against anchor shots?" asked Merry, pausing to chalk his cue.

"No," answered Folansbee. "This is not a balk-line game. Shove shots alone are barred. Make them any way that you can."

"It looks to me as if Mr. Merriwell might not need a discount," observed Folansbee's friend.

"He seems to be rather handy," admitted Parker.

"I am not in practice, you know," said Merry. "I am

liable to misjudge something easy. If I were in practice, I'd stand a much better show with you."

"I haven't touched a cue till now since leaving St. Louis," declared Folansbee.

Somehow, Frank felt put on his metal. The fact that he now had been offered a discount made him determined to do his level best. He sought to anchor the two object balls in the corner, and, by rare good luck, he did so.

Then, while the others watched, he easily ran off fifty, without bringing the balls out of the corner once.

"Whew!" whistled Folansbee, as Frank completed the string. "Why, I was a snap, wasn't I? We'll have to match you against the Snake Charmer," he added, by way of a joke.

There was a derisive laugh close at hand, and they looked up to see a striking-looking man standing there watching them. The man was tall and slender, without being slim. His eyes were coal black and piercing. A black mustache drooped over his mouth, and he had a pointed imperial. His clothes from head to feet were black, and he wore a silk hat on his head. At least fifty persons were watching this man.

"It's the Snake Charmer himself!" muttered Folansbee.

Indeed, it was the most famous billiard and pool player in Colorado, Paoli Maletus.

"My dear sir," he said, speaking to Folansbee, "I do not play that kind of a game. I leave that to boys, such as this young chap here."

This was a contemptuous reference to Frank.

Now there was a man in the gathering, who, for some singular reason, had taken a wonderful liking to Frank. He was a quiet-looking man, dressed in a plain pepper-and-salt suit. He wore a well-trimmed gray beard and gold-bowed spectacles.

Immediately this man stepped forward, observing:

"I have a fancy that this young chap, as you call him, can put up a pretty good game of billiards. I have been watching him, and he plays with brains, as well as with a cue. Of course he is not a professional, but I think he would give a professional a swift time with fair odds."

Paoli Maletus gave the little man a swift glance.

"I don't suppose you have any money you wish to risk in backing the boy?" he said.

"At what odds, sir?" asked the stranger, immediately.

"Odds, which way—money or points?"

"Points, of course."

"What sort of a game?"

"Balk line, certainly."

"Six, eight or twelve-inch?"

"Twelve."

"Well, I will play two hundred to his fifty for even money, if the bet is large enough to make it worth while," said the professional.

The stranger turned to Frank.

"What do you say?" he asked. "Will you play?"

Frank's pride had been touched by the contemptuous manner in which Maletus had spoken of him, but he did not fancy the idea of having a stranger risk money on him.

"I do not think I had better," he said. "I might lose, and I should not like to do that."

"Might lose!" cried Maletus, scornfully. "Of course you would lose! Do you think I would let a kid like you beat me?"

Now this was cutting, indeed, and Frank could feel the warm blood mounting to his face.

"I do not approve of betting on games of chance or skill," he said, quietly.

The billiard sharp laughed shortly, turning away.

"White livered!" he said, snapping his fingers.

This was too much for Frank. He could not bear to be called white livered.

"Wait a moment," he said, quietly; "do not go away now, Mr. Maletus. I can't permit a perfect stranger to risk money on me, but I will place a hundred dollars against your hundred that you cannot run two hundred points to my fifty, with a twelve-inch balk line."

"Put up your money!" exclaimed the Snake Charmer, whirling about. "Place it in the hands of anyone you may select, I will cover it."

"Mr. Folansbee," said Frank, in an aside, "if I lose this money, will you advance me a hundred dollars, in case I need it, on my new play?"

"Of course I will," answered Parker; "but you are making a fool of yourself, Merriwell. Why, Maletus will have a cinch with you! You haven't ever seen him play. He is a wizard. He can do things with the balls that defy scientific explanation. You will be throwing your money away, and I don't like to see you do that."

"I have made the talk now," said Frank, "and I must back it up, even though I am sure of losing. I would not fail to stand by my talk now for five thousand dollars."

Looking into Frank's face, Parker Folansbee understood just how Merry felt about it, and he admired Frank for his pride.

"All right," he said. "Go ahead. I'll let you have five hundred dollars, if you need it. You'll lose, but I shall pray that you make some sort of a showing."

"Thank you," said Frank.

By this time Paoli Maletus had grown impatient.

"The boy has made a big bluff," he said, "I knew it. He won't back up his talk. I thought I had a soft thing."

"You may name the stakeholder, sir," said Frank.

"Where's your money?"

"Select the stakeholder, and I will put the money up."

"I don't believe you have the stuff. It strikes me that you are one of the chaps who make a bluff by wearing good clothes, but never have any rhino."

"Will you be good enough to name the stakeholder?" requested Frank, with perfect coolness.

Merry was holding himself steady as a clock, knowing that he must not become at all nettled, as it would hurt his nerve, and he would require all his nerve in the contest.

"I name Jake Bergen," said Maletus, selecting one of the best-known sporting men of Denver. "Here he is. Now where is your cash?"

Frank took a wad of bills from his pocket, pulling a

hundred-dollar bill from the outside. This he placed in the hand of Jake Bergen, saying:

"Here it is, sir."

"Well!" exclaimed the Snake Charmer; "he really means it! This is like finding money!"

He hastened to cover the sum.

The man who had wished to back Frank now expressed his admiration for the youth's courage.

"But you should have let me put up the money," he said. "I made the offer in the first place."

"I could not do it, sir," said Frank. "I should not have played as well, knowing that the money of a stranger was at stake."

"Well, I hope that you beat this Maletus," said the stranger. "There is something about him that I detest. He is a swaggering braggart. He likes to frighten little children with his snakes, and that kind of a man disgusts me. Ugh!"

"His snakes?" said Frank. "Where are his snakes?"

"Oh, he has them somewhere around. He carries them with him for luck."

"Isn't that a fairy story?" asked Merry, incredulously. "Does the man really carry snakes around?"

"He does, for I have seen them."

Paoli Maletus was selecting a cue. He picked them up, weighed them carefully in his hand, looked at the tips, and then, taking them by the butt, sighted along them, to make sure they were perfectly straight.

The third one he selected seemed to satisfy him. He held it up to sight along it. As he did so, something dark

and squirming slipped down his sleeve and wound around the butt of the cue.

"Ah! that is the one!" he nodded, with satisfaction. "One of my pets has picked it out for me."

Then everyone could see that part of the body of a snake was coiled around the butt of the cue. The reptile was alive, its head lifted somewhat, its beady eyes shining, its forked tongue darting in and out.

With exclamations of alarm several persons fell back from the vicinity of Paoli Maletus.

"I think I will put my pets away," said the man.

From some place he took out a leather bag. Then he removed the snake and carefully dropped it into the bag. He thrust his hand into his bosom and drew out others, which he also placed in the bag. This he closed at the top and placed on one of the card tables near at hand.

"Just a little fad of mine," he said. "I always carry a few of the cunning fellows about with me. Never have been beaten since I took to doing it."

Somebody said he should fancy the snakes would smother in the bag.

"No danger," assured the singular man. "There are a number of air holes to admit air to them."

Bart Hodge was at Merry's side.

"Well, what do you think of that?" muttered the dark-faced youth.

"I think that man knows how to advertise himself by playing the freak," answered Merry. "That is about the size of it. He carries around the snakes as an advertise-

ment, and a good one it is. I am certain he understands the value of advertising."

"But snakes—bah! The things are disgusting, if they are not dangerous."

"All of that," admitted Frank. "But you must remember that many women snake charmers handle them in circuses, museums and shows. It is less disgusting to see a man handle them."

"A woman who will do such a thing is beyond the pale," declared Hodge.

"I fancy there is another reason why this man carries snakes about."

"What's that?"

"To unnerve his opponents. Now, supposing he is playing a close game with a good man, and his antagonist gets a good lead and is holding the balls. Maletus suddenly brings out a snake. He may be close at his opponent's elbow at the time. It gives the other fellow a start; it damages his nerve. He loses a shot right away, and the Snake Charmer takes his turn. He has a way of making men stand in awe of him, and that counts on his side."

"I believe you have sized him up. If he tries those games, he is something of a bluffer, and you stand a show of winning. Keep your nerve, Frank."

"Thank you, old man. Do I lose it very often when I need it?"

"Never knew you to."

A referee was selected, and a man who was known to

be thoroughly capable and square. Then Frank and the professional prepared to "string."

With the first shot down the board and back, they both lay their balls frozen against the head cushion. The second trial resulted in Maletus winning the "go off" by a quarter of an inch.

He started in by making the first shot easily in the usual manner. His next shot spread them. His third caused the cue ball to cut a sharp circle in coming round to the second object ball. His fourth brought them together again, and then he toyed with them for eleven buttons. He seemed to get tired of this, for he separated them, and then he made three fancy shots, each one of which brought bursts of applause from the watching throng.

"The young fellow won't be in it."

"Not a little bit."

"He was foolish to try it."

"Wonder who he is?"

"Oh, some chap who is stuck on himself."

"The Charmer will cure him, if that's the case."

Frank heard many of these muttered comments among the spectators, but his face was perfectly impassive, never revealing that he heard a word.

Maletus brought them together again, gave an exhibition of drawing, following and masséing. It was all very pretty, and he did not stop till he had run off forty-three. Then, by trying to do a fancy shot when he had an easy thing in another way, he missed.

Frank realized that he must do his level best, for the

man who could run forty-three with a twelve-inch balk line was a wonder, and it was not possible to tell what he might do.

Frank was deliberate, and he took the utmost pains, without seeming to do so. In fact, to the spectators it seemed as if the youth went at them carelessly.

The balls would not "run" for him, but, despite that, he made twelve before missing.

"Only twelve!" laughed the Snake Charmer. "Well, I will confess that that is more than I thought you would get in the whole game. You may not have another chance."

But he ran only eight, making fifty-one in all.

Frank went at it again, and he kept the marker shoving up button after button, while the watchers began to breathe quicker and watch him with a growing sense of admiration.

Never in all his life had Frank played so well. He astonished himself, for he knew he was out of practice, and it was natural that he should not play well. Something, however, gave him confidence, and his determination keyed him to renewed efforts.

His twelve became twenty, then followed thirty, and there was breathless interest as he began to climb steadily toward forty.

Bart Hodge was watching Paoli Maletus.

"He doesn't spring any snakes on Merry now," vowed Hodge, to himself.

But be it said to the credit of the man that he did not try to do anything of the sort. He had ceased to sneer,

and he was watching Merriwell with interest, not to say anxiety.

The fortieth button was pushed up by the marker, and still Frank went on. Somebody clapped his hands. Others took it up.

"The boy is a marvel!"

A voice distinctly spoke the words.

"One of the prettiest runs I ever saw," declared the man who had offered to back Frank; "and I have seen Schaefer and Ives."

With the forty-fourth shot Frank missed by a hair.

"Young man," said Maletus, speaking now with a certain respect, "you have done a beautiful trick. I doubt if you could do it again if your life depended on it. I will acknowledge there was great skill displayed, but I don't believe you ever made such a run as that before with a twelve-inch balk line."

Frank smiled, but made no retort.

Maletus prepared to shoot. All his swagger was gone, and it was plain that he was anxious about the outcome of the game. Frank had but seven points to run, while he had a hundred and forty-nine to make.

And he missed his next try, leaving them "set up" for Frank.

"Go in and do him now!" palpitated Hodge. "Why, this seems like old times! You have been taken for a soft thing before this, and this is just the way you always fooled folks."

Frank played slowly and carefully. It was plain that

he was playing to run out fifty without stopping. Once he came near missing, but the referee decided that the second object ball moved at the touch of the cue ball.

Forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine.

One more would win the game!

CHAPTER X.

UNEXPECTED HONORS.

It seemed as if every person in that room was holding his breath. Astonishment marked the faces of all, not even excepting Hodge, who, for all his confidence in Merry, had not expected Frank could make such a beautiful run.

Frank stopped to chalk his cue. He did it very deliberately, as if he enjoyed keeping the spectators in suspense.

Paoli Maletus had not a word to say. He waited for the finish, as a doomed man might await the ax of the executioner.

Having chalked the cue to his entire satisfaction, Merry proceeded to make the shot, which he did easily; and then, before the applause could break out, he made two more in quick succession, leaving him fifty-two to the Snake Charmer's fifty-one.

"Beat him even, by thunder!" exploded somebody.

Then there was a shout.

Hodge stood there, his arms folded, a satisfied smile on his dark face. Merry was still worthy of his utmost confidence. He was the same Merry of the old days, only more determined, more daring, more skillful. Bart could see that; he could see how Frank had advanced, and he knew that Merry had made that astonishing run mainly because he was determined to do so.

"Couldn't sink that fellow and keep him down, if millstones were chained to his neck," thought Hodge.

Parker Folansbee, when he had recovered from his dazed condition, hastened to grasp Frank's hand.

"Heavens!" he gasped, looking Merry over. "What sort of a chap are you? I realized that you were rather remarkable in some ways, but I never fancied you could be a crack billiardist, for you are mild as milk. You never drink, smoke or swear, and——"

"Is it necessary for a crack billiardist to have those three vices?" asked Merry, smilingly.

"No; but they generally have them, just the same."

"Then I shall never become a crack billiardist, I fear."

"Become one! Great Scott! you are one! Why, I don't believe you know what you did! You beat the champion billiard and pool player of Colorado! The string shows that you made more points than he did, although he offered to run two hundred to your fifty. Why, that's enough to make you famous in sporting circles around this place! If we were to play 'John Smith' here, it would be a great advertisement."

"Are you aware," asked Folansbee's friend, the man who had brought them into the club, "that you talked about giving this young man a discount?"

"Yes, I am painfully aware of it," answered Folansbee, flushing a bit. "He can double discount me, and then play me a hundred to my fifty, with a twelve-inch balk line. I have been associated with him some little time, and I have yet to discover anything that he can't do."

"Oh, but there are things I can't do," Frank hastened to say.

"That's right," nodded Hodge. "I'll swear to that, for I know it is true."

"Name one thing," said Folansbee.

"Well," said Hodge, "he can't lie."

The stranger who had offered to back Frank in the first place now came forward, and grasped Merry's hand.

"Permit me to congratulate you," he exclaimed. "I didn't think you could do anything like that, even though I was willing to risk something on you. I do not like this Maletus. He is a swaggering braggart, and he has been doing his best of late to pry into my business. I have been longing to call him down. They say he is a perfectly harmless fellow, but I detest him."

It was plain that the man wished to say something more to Merry, but Maletus himself came forward.

"Well, young chap," he said, "you did a pretty slick trick. I admit that. You are clever, but I misjudged your ability. If I hadn't—well, you wouldn't have been in the game."

"Perhaps not," said Frank, in a non-committal manner.

"Perhaps not!" exclaimed the Snake Charmer. "There is no perhaps about it! I know it!"

"I don't."

"Well, I can soon convince you. Will you play another game, fifty buttons to my two hundred?"

"No."

"You refuse?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"Because I choose to do so. I do not set myself up as a professional billiard player. I cannot make the balls do things you can. I saw you make shots that were entirely new to me. I saw you cause the cue ball to cut some figures that were simply amazing. I fully understand that you know things about billiards of which I never dreamed. I supposed all this before I started to play with you at all."

"Then why did you play?"

"Because you practically drove me into doing so. I had to play or appear ridiculous. I preferred to play even though I lost the hundred dollars. But I did not believe I should lose it."

"If you understood before the game what I could do, why did you think you would not lose the money?"

"Because I thought you would regard me as a snap, and would not exert yourself to the utmost."

"The very thing that happened!"

"I thought you might fool along with me till, by a lucky chance, I could run it out."

"It was no lucky chance. It was a case of clean, straight playing."

"It happened to be, but that was luck, as much as anything else."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I do not believe I could make that run again in a week with a twelve-inch balk line."

"Well, you are honest, to say the least!"

"What is the use of being dishonest?" smiled Frank.

"I have found that, in the long run, it pays better to be perfectly frank."

"I like the way you talk," declared Maletus. "But I'd like a chance to win my hundred back."

"I don't want your money," declared Frank. "I did not play this game to win your money. I seldom bet. I am opposed to gambling, for various reasons, the principal one being that no honest man can mingle with professional sports and gamblers without becoming contaminated in time."

"If you have such scruples, why did you bet at all?"

"Because you forced me into it, as I explained before. You put me in a very nasty position, Mr. Maletus. If I had refused to bet, some of these gentlemen would have smiled and called me a callow youth with a swelled head and no sand. You touched my pride, sir, and that is how I happened to make the wager."

"Well, you have shown pretty good nerve," nodded the Snake Charmer. "I admit that. Jake, give him the money."

The stakeholder handed the amount of the stakes over to Frank.

Merry singled out his own hundred-dollar bill, which he placed in his pocket, passing the rest of the money back to the stakeholder, saying:

"Please return it to Mr. Maletus."

"Now, what do you take me for?" exclaimed the professional billiardist. "Don't think for a moment that I'll take that back."

"But you wanted an opportunity to win it back."

"Yes, I asked for that. Any man has a right to do that. But you must know I can't touch it as a free gift from you. That would stamp me as thoroughly cheap. Do what you like with the money, but don't offer it to me!"

"Put it in your pocket, Merry!" hissed Bart, in Frank's ear. "You need it. It is yours by right."

Frank did not look at Bart.

"Then," he said, "if you will not take it back, Mr. Maletus, I shall donate it to this club as a free gift, to be used as the secretary may see fit."

There was a moment's hush, then a clapping of hands on all sides.

The stakeholder promptly turned the money over to the secretary of the club, who happened to be on hand.

"Before the club accepts this gift," said the secretary, "I will ask the name of the giver."

"Gentlemen and fellow club members," said Folansbee's friend, the man who had brought them into the club, "I have the pleasure of introducing to you the famous college athlete of Yale, Mr. Frank Merriwell."

"Mr. Merriwell," said the secretary, simply, "I think the club will accept your gift, and I thank you now, in behalf of the organization. As you are not a resident of Denver, and as you have shown by your nerve in winning from Paoli Maletus at billiards, I shall propose you be made an honorary member of this club. I do not believe there will be any opposition to the proposal."

"No! no! no!" shouted voices on every side.

"It will be an honor to the club," said a well-known

Denver mine owner, "to have as a member of this club the only man who ever defeated Paoli Maletus at billiards in these rooms. There will be no trouble about making Mr. Merriwell an honorary member."

Thus unexpected honors came to Frank Merriwell, and he was quite the most famous person in that club that evening.

Paoli Maletus touched him on the shoulder.

"You are strictly in it, Mr. Merriwell," he said. "I'd like to have a little talk with you, where we could be alone by ourselves. Do you mind coming over here to this table?"

"Not at all," said Frank, as he followed the man.

They sat down on opposite sides of the table, upon which the professional billiardist had placed the leather bag that contained his remarkable collection of pets.

Maletus fixed his piercing, black eyes on Frank with a penetrating look. For some moments he did not speak.

Frank was conscious of a queer sensation that crept over him, but he instantly cast it off.

"This man who charms snakes is a hypnotist," Merry immediately decided. "I must set my will against his."

Being on his guard, Frank was able to resist Paoli's influence, if, indeed, the man sought to exert it upon him.

After staring at Frank for some moments, Maletus seemed to grow impatient or vexed. He muttered something, and then he smiled, and, to Merry's surprise, there was something rarely pleasant about the man's smile.

"I was trying to read your true character," declared

the Snake Charmer; "but I find it is not easy. You are not superficial. There is something besides what one sees on the surface."

"I trust so, sir," said Merry, quietly.

At this moment the stranger who had offered to back Frank against Maletus approached the table, saying:

"Excuse me, but it is a matter of importance, Mr. Merriwell, and I wish——"

Paoli Maletus waved his hand.

"You will have to wait, Mr. Drew," he said. "I am talking with the young gentleman now."

"No, sir!" exclaimed the man, sharply. "My business is most important, and I refuse to wait for you or——"

Maletus had turned, and was looking the speaker squarely in the eyes. The man began to falter and mumble, while a strange, set look gradually appeared on his face, and he soon stopped attempting to speak.

"Go away," commanded Maletus. "Your business can wait. I have some business with Mr. Merriwell myself."

Then, to Frank's surprise, the man turned round and walked away, in a most submissive manner.

"He is very annoying to me," declared Maletus. "He has been following me about everywhere, and he seems determined to pry into my business."

The other man had said the same thing about the Snake Charmer.

Frank wondered which of the men spoke the truth.

"Now, Mr. Merriwell," Maletus said, "I have taken a great interest in you, for a reason I shall presently dis-

close. First, I wish to ask you some questions. I hope you will not think I am trying to pry into your affairs, for I assure you that what I am doing is in your interest."

"My interest?"

"Yes."

"Why should you be particularly interested in me?"

"Because I believe that, some day, you may become one of the greatest billiard players in the world."

"Nonsense!"

"There is no nonsense about it. I am in sober earnest. I am aware that you made that great run a short time ago purely on your nerve. It requires nerve, as well as brains and judgment, to play billiards. You have the combination. There is one test to which I should like to put you. If you proved equal to the occasion, I should be confident that you would make a great player."

"Really, sir," smiled Frank, "I have no desire to become a professional billiard player."

"Not now, perhaps; but you may have that desire some time. I believe you will acknowledge that I have nerve. No man who did not have any would carry around such pets as these."

He opened the mouth of the leather bag, spreading it back. There was a stir within—a sinuous motion.

With his lips the man made a strange, humming sound. The movement within the bag increased. Up rose some wicked, little heads from the opening.

Paoli Maletus was calling his pets.

"There they are!" he exclaimed. "Aren't they beauties?"

Bart Hodge had approached. He stood near, his hands in his pockets, watching the snakes.

"I presume they are beauties, if anybody thinks so," laughed Frank. "I should call them anything but that."

"Queer how men differ in their tastes," chuckled the Snake Charmer. "Now, I think them beautiful. It takes nerve to handle them. You showed one kind of nerve when you beat me at billiards, and now I wonder if you have the other kind? Shake!"

He held his hand extended directly over the open bag of snakes.

Without the least hesitation, Frank accepted the proffered hand.

The eyes of Bart Hodge may have grown a bit brighter, but he made no move and showed no astonishment.

Not so with others.

There were many witnesses, and they stared, aghast, as Merriwell and Maletus shook hands above the bag of serpents.

"You are all right," nodded the billiard sharp, as he relinquished Frank's hand. "It takes a man who is not afraid of snakes or devils to become a great billiardist, and you can become one, if you choose. I should be proud to have you for a pupil. In six months I'd be able to take you East and beat the hide off anything they could stack up against you. There is boodle in it. What do you say? Do we make a partnership?"

"Hardly," answered Merry. "I have no desire to become a professional sport. I enjoy amateur sports of all kinds, but professionalism is barred with me."

"Sorry, but you know your own business best."

Then, of a sudden, the queer man asked:

"Did you ever hear of Prof. Millard Fillmore?"

"Don't think I ever did," confessed Frank. "And yet somehow, the name seems familiar."

"Think a while, and see if you cannot remember having heard it."

Frank thought swiftly, and he soon said:

"I am now quite certain that I have heard it, but I can't tell when or where."

"Did you and some of your friends once cross the continent on bicycles from New York to San Francisco?"

"Yes."

"You crossed the Utah Desert?"

"We did."

"Came near perishing there?"

"That's right."

"You found a skeleton?"

"Right again."

"Said skeleton was decorated with gold and diamonds and other precious stones?"

"Quite correct."

"And it had a way of disappearing almost right before your eyes?"

"True as preaching; but I'd like to know how you found all this out. Who told you about it?"

"Never mind just now how I found it out. But now I fancy you remember about Prof. Millard Fillmore?"

"Yes; he was an old hermit, who lived in a cave on the desert. He had found the gold and jewels with which the

skeleton was decorated. It is probable the stuff belonged to some family that attempted to fly across the desert in years gone by to escape the wrath of the Destroying Angels. They must have perished on the desert, one and all. Fillmore, if that was his right name, became lost on the desert, and discovered the treasure, or he was searching for it, and found it in that manner. At any rate, the discovery turned his brain, and he became raving mad. He used to decorate the skeleton and frighten Indians away with it. After his death, I took his collection of treasure to Carson City, where it was deposited in a bank."

"That is right. Now I know beyond a doubt that you are the Frank Merriwell who found the treasure."

"But you have not told me how it is that you happen to know so much about it."

"No; but I will tell you, if you will come with me. I can also give you some information that will be of great value to you. I am in the confidence of the Carson City bank, and what I have to say to you must not be heard by others. Will you come?"

"Certainly," answered Merry, whose interest had been aroused. "Where shall we go?"

"Explain to your friends that you will return presently," instructed Maletus, "and then follow me."

Frank left the table, and spoke to Hodge and Folansbee. Bart insisted on going along, but Frank told him flatly that he could not.

"Don't trust that man, Merriwell," urged Bart. "A person who will choose the companionship of snakes is a

snake himself. A man is known by the company he keeps."

"Oh, he is eccentric, that's all."

"I tell you he is treacherous."

"Well, he can't make anything out of me. Here, take my money—keep it. I'll be back presently."

"I hope so!" exclaimed Bart, as Merry followed Paoli Maletus from the club.

CHAPTER XI.

PAOLI MALETUS.

Maletus had taken his bag of snakes. He carried them in his hand, with Merry walking at his side.

It was a beautiful night. The moon was high overhead, pouring her white light into the streets of the great Western city.

The strange man talked as he walked, and Frank confessed to himself that Maletus had a fascinating way about him.

Frank was not familiar with Denver, so he did not know just where he was being taken. Under some circumstances, he might have been suspicious, but he failed to see how the Snake Charmer could make anything by injuring him. Still, he had resolved to be on his guard.

They turned down a dark street, stopped before a dark house, and Maletus let them in with a key.

"Here is where I live," he said.

"Then you live here in Denver all the time?" questioned Merry.

"No, not all the time; but I keep this place. I am permitted to keep my pets here, you know. In some places they object to them."

He laughed. There was something unpleasant about that laugh.

It was dark in the hall. On a landing above, a tiny gas

jet was burning dimly, but it seemed to accentuate the gloom, if anything.

They groped their way up the stairs. Having ascended two flights, the billiardist led the way to the back of the house, and there he unlocked another door. Frank followed him into the room.

"Stand still where you are," advised the strange man, as he closed the door.

There was a peculiar click when the door swung to, and Frank felt that it had locked itself with a spring. He was alone in that dark room with the remarkable man.

Somehow, there was a peculiar odor about the place. Merry did not like it, and he said:

"I believe your room needs airing, Mr. Maletus."

"Oh, you will get used to that in a few moments," said the Snake Charmer. "You will find the odor agreeable."

In the darkness, Merry felt for his revolver, making sure it was handy and ready for use. There was something very mysterious about that strange visit to the place, and, somehow, although he did not understand the reason for it, Frank had a presentiment that his companion had evil designs.

Scratch—splutter—flare! Maletus struck a match and lighted a gas jet.

"Sit down, Mr. Merriwell," he said, pleasantly; "make yourself at home."

In the center of the room was a table. Frank advanced to a chair beside it and started to sit down.

"Wait a moment!" exclaimed Paoli Maletus. "I

wouldn't sit there. Take the other chair. You might hurt Jumbo."

"Jumbo?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In the chair."

Frank looked, and it was by an effort that he refrained from jumping and uttering an exclamation.

Coiled on the seat of the chair was a huge mottled snake!

"Thank you," said Merry, governing his voice. "I don't think I would care to sit down there."

He took the other chair, but he looked to make sure no snake was occupying it.

"Jumbo is my especial pet and pride," declared the Snake Charmer, taking the huge serpent up carefully. "Many people claim that snakes do not have brains, but I assure you that Jumbo has. I can handle him with perfect impunity."

He placed the creature on the floor. Frank could fancy the snake creeping along and coiling about his legs, and it made him rather uneasy.

"Not the least danger of it," declared Maletus, as if he had read Merry's thoughts. "However, if you say so——"

"Never mind," said Frank, as the man made a move as if to take the serpent away. "I am willing to accept your assurance."

The room was a dismal place just then, despite the fact that there were many large plants and vines in it. On the

walls were strange ornaments, principal among which were Indian relics, bows, arrows, tomahawks, spear and arrow heads, feathered war bonnets, and so forth. At one end of the room was a magnificent mounted head of a Rocky Mountain stag. At the other was the head of a grizzly bear.

A door that seemed to connect with another room was standing closed.

Seeing Frank glance toward that door, Maletus said:

"My sleeping room is in there."

"I presume you keep the door closed, so that the snakes will not get in and occupy your bed?" said Merry.

"Not exactly. That room opens into the hall, and the servant can get in there to care for it without entering here. She doesn't fancy snakes much."

"I don't wonder." laughed Merry.

He was interested. He studied Paoli Maletus, trying to fathom the man. Character study was one of Merriwell's hobbies. He wondered if the Snake Charmer could not be used in some way as an effective character in a play.

"You seem to like plants," observed Frank.

"My pets, some of them, like them. See."

The man advanced to a tall bush that stood in a large pot. He reached into the bush and pulled a small snake from a branch of it. The reptile had been coiled there.

Again Frank repressed a shiver. It was not pleasant to think that all the plants and vines might be covered with snakes.

Maletus was watching Merry. It was evident that he

had expected the youth to express repugnance or some sort of emotion, but, if he was disappointed by Frank's coolness, he did not show it.

Now the man came back, and sat down by the table.

"You do not notice the odor as much as you did when you first came in?" he said, questioningly.

"No," admitted Merry. "I suppose I am getting used to it."

"That's right. In a little while you will like it. It is not many persons who are given the privilege of coming here. I suppose it is not many who would care to come."

"Very likely. Now we are here, Mr. Maletus, would you mind telling why you brought me?"

"I had an idea that you might be interested."

"Was that the only reason? I believe you said you could and would tell me how you came to know so much about my adventure in the Utah Desert."

The Snake Charmer nodded.

"I did say so."

He leaned his elbows on the table, his bright, black eyes fastened on Frank. Merry did not like the man's stare, and he was instantly on his guard against the hypnotic influence he believed Maletus possessed.

"Before I tell you anything more," said the Snake Charmer, "I have a proposition to make."

"I have no objections," said Frank; "but I may not agree to your proposition, you know."

"I rather think you will," said Maletus, with a meaning inflection. "It will be for your benefit."

"Well, I am listening," impatiently.

"If I help you to win a fortune, you should be grateful. Now, I will agree to do that, if you will agree to divide the fortune with me. Surely, that is fair. That is my proposition. What do you say?"

Frank laughed.

"What are you driving at?" he asked.

"Business," was the curt answer.

"But I don't understand."

"It is plain."

"It may be, but——"

"I can aid you to win a fortune."

"How?"

"That I will reveal to you when you have pledged yourself to divide it with me."

"Does this fortune belong to me?"

"It will—after you get it."

"Rightfully?"

"Of course."

"Because," said Merry, decisively, "if it does not belong to me, I do not want it."

"That's where you are foolish. I had as lief have a fortune that did not belong to me, in case I could use it and it could not be taken from me, as one that did belong to me. In fact, I think I should enjoy spending a fortune that belonged to some one else more than I should enjoy spending my own."

It was a dropping of the mask, and Frank realized that Paoli Maletus was, indeed, a man without scruples. The thought flashed through Merry's head that Hodge had sized the fellow up about right.

"That is where we differ," declared Frank, positively.

"Oh, well, never mind," said Maletus, with that queer laugh of his. "We can't all think alike, you know. But, in case I help you to a fortune, I am perfectly willing to accept half of it, and spend it, too."

"I don't understand how you are going to do this remarkable thing. I wish you would make it clearer."

"If I made it too clear, you might be able to secure the fortune without my aid, and so I would defeat myself. I prefer to have your promise first."

"In case I do not give you the promise—what then?"

"Oh, but I think you will," said the man, in a decisive manner.

"I don't see why I should. If this fortune you speak of belongs to me, why should I divide it with you?"

"Because I will have it."

"I am willing to pay you a good sum for any real service you may do me, but I shall object to extortion."

"I do not think your objections will stand."

Maletus said this in a manner that was positively nasty, and Frank felt like telling the man what he thought of him without delay, but held himself in check.

Frank had been thinking since Maletus made his proposition, and now he said:

"Is this fortune in any way connected with the skeleton we found in the Utah Desert?"

"Now, don't begin to ask questions!" came sharply from Paoli Maletus. "I shall tell you nothing till I have your promise."

"Then you will tell me nothing," said Frank, rising. "I do not care to enter into such a foolish contract with you. If there is a fortune that really belongs to me, I think I shall receive it in due time, without your assistance. I am going now."

Maletus seemed alarmed.

"Now, don't go off that way!" he exclaimed. "Sit down again, and we will talk it over some more."

"I don't think it will be any use."

"Why not?"

"You have made your proposition, and I refuse to accept it."

"Well, if you will come to my terms, perhaps I may come to yours. It will do no harm to talk it over. You have said you were willing to pay me something if I aided you."

The man seemed coming to his senses, and Frank sat down. He was really curious to know what Maletus was driving at, but he suppressed his curiosity so that it was not apparent.

"I am a man who lives by his wits," explained the billiardist. "I have done so all my life. If I see an opportunity to make a hundred dollars, I grasp it—unless there is too much work connected with it. Some time ago a man came to me and said: 'Your name is not Paoli Maletus; it is Fearson Fillmore.' Now, it happens that my real name is Fearson Fillmore, but, for certain reasons, I changed it. That was many years ago. At first I denied that my name was Fillmore, but the man had the

proofs. Then he asked me if I had ever heard of Prof. Millard Fillmore——"

"The mad hermit of the Utah Desert!" exclaimed Frank.

"Yes," nodded the Snake Charmer.

"Now I begin to understand."

"Do you?"

"I think so."

"Perhaps so."

"The fortune to which you refer is the treasure the hermit found in the desert? Isn't it? Speak the truth."

"It is," admitted the billiard sharp.

"And you are related to Prof. Fillmore, so a part of it, at least, belongs to you. But I fail to see where I come in."

Maletus smiled strangely.

"You are a shrewd guesser," he said; "but you have not hit the truth. Unfortunately for me, I am in no way related to Prof. Fillmore."

"No?"

"No. If I had been, I should not be here to-night, proposing to help you to a fortune, in case you divvied with me. You would not be in it."

"Then what——"

"All in good time, my dear, young man," said Maletus, with a wave of his hand. "The man who came to me had been engaged by the Carson City bank to find the relatives of Millard Fillmore. For a year he had been doing his best to trace them, but he had found none. I

seemed to be his final resort. He had discovered in some way that my name used to be Fillmore, and he asked me to establish relationship with the professor. I was unable to do so, although, being told that it would be to my advantage, I tried to do so. I did not know then that a large fortune awaited me if I succeeded; and, at last, in disgust, I gave up, acknowledging that Prof. Fillmore was in no way related to me."

Frank was intensely interested now. He was beginning to understand what the strange man was attempting to do.

"Go on," he urged.

"My curiosity being aroused," continued the Snake Charmer, "I determined to find out everything about the affair. The agent of the bank had taken a strong dislike to me, but I succeeded in getting an opportunity to talk to him privately. Then I exerted my influence on him. I hypnotized him."

Frank's conviction that the man was a hypnotist was confirmed at last.

"While he was in that condition," Maletus went on, "I caused him to tell me the whole story. Thus I found out the truth about Prof. Fillmore and the skeleton in the desert. Thus I learned about you, Frank Merriwell. I learned that you had deposited the treasure in the bank, and it was said it would become yours if no relative of Millard Fillmore was found."

"A very interesting story," nodded Frank.

"When I heard your name to-night, I wondered if you

were the Frank Merriwell. I decided to find out, and I did so in a very few moments. Then I resolved to bring you here, and see if I could not make some kind of a bargain with you by which I could get hold of a part of the fortune. Now you have the whole yarn straight enough."

"And I am very much obliged to you," smiled Merry. "But, when you speak of nerve, permit me to say that I believe you have the greatest nerve of any man living."

"You are very complimentary."

"Yes, I believe you have all of that. Few men would have thought of trying to get hold of a part of that fortune in such a manner. Now, what particular service can you be to me in procuring this fortune? If no relative of Millard Fillmore is found, it is bound to come to me, anyhow. Yes, you surely have a remarkable nerve!"

"I believe in making a bluff for a thing, even if I do not get it," declared Maletus.

"Well, I thank you for the trouble you have taken. If you will tell me the name of the bank's agent, I'll consider what sum you shall receive when I get this fortune."

"That is wonderfully kind of you," smiled the Snake Charmer, in his queer way. "The bank agent is still within my control, although he does not know it. He has been lingering here in Denver many months, and I have caused him to report to the bank that he is tracing relatives of Millard Fillmore. When he is not perfectly under my control, he expresses a strong feeling of aversion for me. He is not aware that I have dragged all his

secrets from him, and he has no remembrance of telling me everything while he was hypnotized."

"I think I know him!" exclaimed Frank.

"Do you?"

"Sure!"

"Name him."

"I do not know his name."

"Then how——"

"I have seen him. He was at the club to-night. He offered to back me against you. He sought to speak to me while we were talking across the card table. Then you threw your influence over him, and caused him to obey when you told him to go away."

"You are right, Mr. Merriwell," admitted Maletus. "He is the agent of the bank."

"Well, I don't see but you have given me all the information I require. I am sure it was very kind of you! Now I will——"

"Do not go just yet," urged Maletus. "I will go back to the club with you. Have you noticed this peculiar flower, Mr. Merriwell?"

He took up a small pot, in which was a flowering plant. The edges of the flower's petals were purple, the heart was yellow. From the heart rose something like a forked tongue, tipped at both points with tiny balls of black.

"Isn't it odd?" asked the Snake Charmer. "I call it the Serpent's Mouth. It has a peculiar odor. Smell it."

He placed the flower before Frank, who stooped to in

hale its singular fragrance. It had a sweet perfume, but, after a moment, the odor seemed rather sickening.

Frank's nose was touching the flower. He attempted to draw back, but a strange sensation of giddiness came over him, and he seemed robbed of strength and will. He realized that he was in danger, and yet he drew in deep breaths of the potent perfume, despite his own will. Forward he leaned, and then, as Paoli Maletus drew the plant away, he fell upon the table, utterly overcome.

CHAPTER XII.

FRANK'S DESPERATE ACT.

It did not seem to Frank that he fully lost consciousness, but, when he began to revive, he was aware that something had happened. He felt a weight over his shoulders and about his neck, and he found himself sitting bolt upright in his chair, while across the table was the evil face of the Snake Charmer.

Maletus smiled, and Frank saw the man was speaking, although at first his voice seemed like a distant and indistinct murmur. After a very brief time, however, Merry began to understand, and the voice grew more and more distinct, as if it were coming nearer and nearer.

"Please remain perfectly quiet, Mr. Merriwell," the man was saying. "You have shown that you have nerve, but now is the time to make it all the more certain. If you start, jump or try to fling my friend off, he will become angered, and you will pay for your lack of nerve with your life."

Frank felt something move and slide along his neck. He turned his eyes downward, and, to his horror, he saw that the huge serpent, Jumbo, was coiled there.

Of course, Frank's first impulse was to seize the reptile and attempt to tear it off; but then he realized that it was quite likely that Paoii Maletus spoke the truth, and he might anger the snake without accomplishing his purpose.

Every nerve in his body became strained under the ordeal. He could feel cold sweat starting out on his face.

Maletus saw that Frank knew the huge snake was there.

"Yes, you have nerve," he said, as if in compliment. "Either that, or you are too frightened to move. It makes no difference, for, in either case, you are preserving your life by remaining quiet."

Frank's lips parted, and he attempted to speak, but the words would not come at first. After a moment, however, he managed to say:

"Be kind enough to remove this thing from my neck, Mr. Maletus! I may have nerve, but I am willing to admit that I do not like it."

The Snake Charmer laughed triumphantly.

"No, I did not suppose you would like it. That is not remarkable. But you will do well to heed my warning, and let the creature alone."

"You placed it there?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"For a purpose. You refused to accept my offer, and you have obtained from me all the information I can give. You have not even offered to share a certain percentage of your fortune with me. I resolved not to let you leave this chamber till I had brought you to terms. I have been unable to hypnotize you, for you had a way of setting your will up in opposition to mine, and you have a will of your own."

"And so, with the aid of your pet, you are going to

compel me to give you a part of this fortune, if I receive it?"

"That is right."

"Do you think I will keep my promise, if I make it under such circumstances?" asked Frank.

"Yes, I think you will."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because I will explain to you what will happen if you do not keep it."

"What will happen?"

"I shall find you, and I shall have some of my pets with me. One of them will be placed where it will strike you with its fangs. Your life will end in agony!"

"Well, you are a thoroughbred villain!"

"Yes, I believe I am," admitted Maletus, coolly. "I am rather proud of it. I think you will acknowledge that I am no ordinary villain. I detest an ordinary villain. If I could not be something out of the usual, something remarkable as a villain, I would not be one."

This was said with the utmost frankness.

The serpent moved upon Frank's neck, giving him a chill. He clinched his hands.

"Why didn't you tie me?" he asked. "Why didn't you fix my hands so I could not touch this reptile?"

"Because I wanted your hands free, so you could sign your name to an agreement I shall draw up. You see, I have writing materials here before me. I shall write an agreement by which you will pledge yourself to give me one-half the Fillmore fortune when you receive it."

"Such a pledge would not be worth the paper it is

written on. If I will not keep a verbal pledge, I will not keep one made in writing."

"Well, we will have it made, just the same. You will sign it?"

"No!"

"Yes, you will!"

"I refuse!"

"Not when you understand just what refusal means. I shall sing a little song to Jumbo. That song has a peculiar effect on him. It will cause him to draw his body tighter and tighter about your neck. You will be garroted by the living snake!"

"Well, you are a human monster!"

"I expected you would apply some such title to me; but you are in a trap, and you may as well make the most of it. You will sign?"

"Draw up your paper."

Maletus laughed.

"I thought you would come to time," he said.

Coolly, he spread a sheet of paper before him. He picked up a pen, tried it, and then dipped it in the ink.

"Let me see," he said; "will you be kind enough to give me the correct date? I have forgotten the day of the month."

Frank gave him the date, and he began to write. Scratch, scratch, scratch, went his pen over the paper.

Now there seemed something in the scratching sound that attracted the attention of the huge snake. It lifted its head and almost immediately began to move it toward

the table, sliding down Frank's breast. Its body uncoiled from about Frank's neck.

A sudden determination came to Merry. He waited and watched. He was biding his time.

Maletus finished his writing.

"There," he said; "I believe that is all right. I will read it to you."

Then he looked up, and saw that more than half the body of the great snake was on the table.

At that instant Merry lifted his hands, grasped the serpent, gave it a fling, and kicked himself over backward, chair and all.

He flung the snake off, and the reptile struck Maletus, coiling round the man's neck.

Frank leaped to his feet.

With a cry, Maletus also sprang up, trying to remove the serpent.

Angered by the rough treatment it had received, the reptile wound itself round the man's neck, hissing loudly.

Maletus shouted with terror, and sought to drag it away.

The sight was one to fill the youth with horror. He bounded to the door, and sought to tear it open.

It was locked!

Then Frank backed off and hurled himself against it with furious force. It gave before the assault with a crash.

When he reached the bottom of the second flight, Merry scarcely knew, but he did so in some manner. He was able to open the outside door, and out into the night

he plunged, running almost directly into the arms of a policeman.

"Here, officer!" gasped Frank; "in here! I don't know what you can do, but the man who lives on the second floor back is attacked by one of his own snakes!"

"By me saoul!" exclaimed the officer. "It's thot shnake man! Oi knew he'd be after havin' throuble wid his own reptoiles some toime. But Oi'll not go up there till I hiv some wan to go wid me pwhat knows somethin' about th' house."

He rushed in, evidently thinking Frank would follow. But Merry did nothing of the kind. He turned and made all haste to get away from that locality.

"Well, where in the world have you been?" demanded Hodge, as Merry came walking into the club. "I attempted to follow you and that freak, but lost you on the street somehow. You are pale, Frank."

"I have seen something to make me pale," declared Merry, soberly. "I have passed through a number of adventures in my life, but I believe the one to-night caps them all."

The small, gray-bearded man who had offered to back Merriwell against Maletus came hurrying forward.

"I have been waiting here to see you, Mr. Merriwell," he said.

"Yes, I know," nodded Merry. "You are the gentleman who has been trying to find the relatives of Prof. Millard Fillmore, in order to restore to them the fortune which the professor found on the Utah Desert."

"Well, I'd like to know how you learned that!" exclaimed the man, astonished.

"The man known as Paoli Maletus told me."

"He? Oh, yes, he could tell you; but I did not suppose he would, for I have never told him that you were in any way interested in that affair."

Frank did not explain that the bank's agent had told Maletus without being conscious that he did so.

"I thought once that this Maletus, as he calls himself, might be one of Fillmore's relatives," said the agent, "as his real name is Fillmore; but I have learned that he is not. I have done my duty, as directed by the bank, and I find no trace of any relatives. I shall report thus, and the fortune, with the amount of my expenses deducted, will be turned over to you. You will be rich, young man."

"What's this?" cried Bart, in astonishment.

"Oh, you are in it!" laughed Merry. "You were with me when we found the skeleton in the desert. That skeleton has left us a legacy."

It was some moments before Bart could understand, and then he said:

"It all belongs to you, Frank, for you were the one who really found Prof. Fillmore."

"And you were with me, as also were Rattleton, Browning, Diamond and Toots, my colored boy. The fortune shall be divided into six equal parts, and we will share alike."

"Of course, you will be at liberty to do with it as you

choose after it comes into your possession," said the agent of the bank; "but you were the one who deposited it in the bank, and the bank will return it to you."

"Well, if you are not a lucky dog, Merry!" cried Hodge, in delight. "Just when fortune seems to have hit you a terrible blow, she turns round and smiles on you. You will be able to go back to Yale with flying colors."

"And you, too, old man."

"Oh, I don't know that I want to go back. I have not made a record there to be proud of."

"But I want you to go back. I want you to catch for me when I pitch on the nine. I want you with me, anyhow. If I receive this fortune, Bart, I shall do just as I said I would at the time when it fell into our hands—I shall divide it equally among us all."

Parker Folansbee had been listening.

"Well, now I suppose you will quit the show business, Merriwell?" he said, rather dejectedly.

"Oh, not right away," answered Frank. "I have not received this fortune yet, and there may be a number of hitches and delays before I do. Perhaps something will happen that will prevent me from receiving it at all. I shall keep on hustling for a time. I am going to produce my new play, anyhow. If it proves to be a winner, I may retire from the road, but leave it for you to run."

"Well, now, that will be all right," said Folansbee, relieved. "Though, of course, I shall be sorry to have you retire."

"But where have you been?" asked Bart. "Why did

you come back here looking so pale? What did you mean when you spoke of some kind of an adventure?"

Frank gathered them about him, and told them of his unpleasant experience with Paoli Maletus, the Snake Charmer.

"I knew that man was a snake himself!" exclaimed Hodge, when Frank had finished. "I hope his pet finished him!"

"I think you will read in the morning papers a full account of his destruction by the snake," said Frank.

Instead of that, however, there was an item in one of the morning papers that told of a sensational struggle between Maletus and his largest pet, which had ended by the man's flinging the reptile off and escaping from the room. Maletus had not been killed by the snake.

"That being the case," said Frank, "I will see that the gentleman is punished for his dastardly attempt upon me."

"That's right!" approved Hodge. "Give it to him!"

Frank swore out a warrant for the arrest of "one Fearson Fillmore, alias Paoli Maletus," and he and Bart accompanied the two officers who went to serve the paper.

But the Snake Charmer was not to be found. He had made an early move that morning, disappearing from the place where he had lived, taking his pets along with him.

"He's run for it," said Frank. "Well, let him keep away from me! I may be easy with a human being in whom I fancy there are redeemable qualities, but I have neither sympathy nor mercy for that creature."

"It's a shame the snake didn't do the job, and rid the world of a treacherous whelp!" growled Hodge.

That day a number of the old company started for the East. Frank persuaded Elsie to stay longer.

He had an interview with the agent of the bank, in which he established his identity to the man's entire satisfaction.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DASTARDLY TRICK.

About a month passed, however, before the legal steps necessary to put Frank in possession of his fortune could be taken. Meantime, he was working hard on his new play, for Frank was not the man to idle. He knew well that it is the worker who wins in the great game of life.

One afternoon Bart came up to his room, and urged him to take a walk.

"You're working too hard, Frank," exclaimed Bart. "You ought to let up a bit!"

"Oh, I can stand it, I guess," was Frank's cheerful response.

"Oh, you can stand it, all right," grumbled Bart. "You seem able to stand anything—even a walk with me now."

Frank saw that Bart was in one of his depressed moods. So, laying down his pen, he came over and laid his hand affectionately on Bart's arm.

"You good, old chap," he said, humorously. "You are in one of those moods when you can't do anything pleasantly, even such a pleasant deed as evincing thoughtfulness of me. I will gladly take a walk with you."

And, quickly getting into his street clothing, he and Bart left the hotel and started on their walk.

As they were passing the Hotel Metropole, Frank noticed a ragged, little urchin, weeping bitterly and searching in the gutter. He paused and asked, kindly:

"Hello, my lad, what's the matter?"

"Come along!" exclaimed Bart. "We haven't time to bother with him!"

"Wait," said Frank. "He seems to have lost something."

"Dat's right, mister!" sobbed the boy, turning a tear-wet and dirt-begrimed face toward Frank. "If I don't find it, I'll never dast go back home to me mudder! Oh! oh! I wisht I was dead!"

Not at all impressed, Hodge thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and regarded the little fellow unsympathetically.

"What is it you have lost?" asked Frank.

"A five-dollar gold piece!" was the answer.

Hodge laughed derisively.

"There, Frank," he said, "I think you are on to the kid's little game now. Come on."

"Wait a minute," urged Merry.

"Dis ain't no game!" cried the boy, resentfully. "Dis is on der level. I lost dat money right here. It flewed outer me hand, an' I heerd it go chin-ling-ching, but dat was all. I never seed where it went ter, an' now I can't find it. Oh, boo-hoo!"

"What would he be doing with a five-dollar gold piece?" asked Bart, derisively. "Why, he never saw one in his life!"

"Dat's a lie!" shouted the boy, straightening up and glaring at Bart with his red and swollen eyes. "I hed dat money here a little while ergo, an' I don't care wot

youse say! You don't know ev'rything, if yer do wear swell clothes!"

"Oh, come on!" Hodge urged Merry, flushing slightly over the manner in which he was addressed by the boy. "If he had a five-dollar gold piece, he must have stolen it, and it served him right to lose it."

"Dat's another lie!" piped the boy, shrilly. "I never stole nutting in me life, an' I'll fight der snoozer wot says I did, if he's Jeffries hisself! Put up yer fins!"

He squared away at Bart in a truly comical manner, so angry over Hodge's words that he had forgotten to cry.

Frank caught him by the collar, laughing a little.

"Hold on, young man," he said; "that's my friend, and I don't want to see you whip a friend."

"Dat feller your friend?" cried the boy, scornfully. "Why, youse is a gent, an' he's a stiff! I wouldn't call no such duffer as dat my friend, if I was in your place."

"Saucy little rascal!" muttered Hodge, blushing furiously.

"Don't forget that you provoked him by what you said," said Frank.

"But you've seen that game he's playing. It's old."

"It ain't no game," asserted the urchin. "I losted dat money right here."

"He's trying to win your sympathy, Merry," said Bart, "so you will give him something. But, when he talks of losing five dollars—that's too thin! He might fool somebody if he put it down to a quarter!"

"Say, youse is der kind of feller wot knows it all!"

cried the boy, looking his hatred at Bart. "You give me pains! If you was ter offer me five dollars, I wouldn't take it! See?"

"I'd hate to offer you five cents, if I needed it."

"Yes, I reckon dat's right. Ye're so blamed mean, ye wouldn't give nobody five cents! I don't want nuttin' of you!"

"Don't worry; you won't get anything."

"It does seem rather strange that you should have a five-dollar gold piece," said Frank. "How did it happen?"

"Dad's sick. He's bin sick a week now, an' marm, she don't leave him at all, so she give me der money ter go ter der drug store ter git some med'cin'. Here's der perscripshun wot der doctor left."

The boy displayed a crumpled and soiled bit of paper. Frank saw it really was a physician's prescription.

"This seems to be genuine," he observed, glancing at Bart.

"Oh, yes, I haven't a doubt!" sneered Hodge. "The kid is shrewd, and he has everything well arranged."

"Well, if he is playing a game," smiled Frank, "he is pretty slick about it, and he deserves some reward for his ingenuity."

"And that reward will serve to encourage him to crime. You have queer ideas about some things, Merry."

"If I was as big as ye, I'd smash ye!" shrieked the urchin, shaking a dirty fist at Bart. "Don't you believe him, sir," appealing to Frank. "I losted dat money, an' I ain't workin' no game. I've hunted an' hunted here, but I can't find it. It's der last five dad had, an' dere ain't

no tellin' w'en he'll be well enough ter go ter work ag'in."

Frank stopped to help the boy search.

"It's too bad," said Merry; "but it seems that you should be able to find it here."

"You're making a fool of yourself, Frank!" exclaimed Bart. "People in the hotel are laughing at you."

"Let them laugh. I do not regard it as a disgrace to help this boy search for the money he has lost. Some of them in there could lose five thousand dollars, without doubt, and not feel it nearly as much as this boy would five dollars. They can afford to sit there and laugh while he cries his eyes out searching for the money he dropped!"

Bart muttered something about being fooled into sentiment, and moved away a few paces.

Merry continued to search for some minutes, but he found nothing of the money the boy claimed he had lost.

"I'm coming back this way pretty soon," he said. "I'll have more time then, and I'll try again to see if I can help you find the money, my lad."

"T'ank yer, sir," said the boy. "Ye're a real gent; but dat feller wot you calls a friend, he's mighty poor comp'ny fer you."

"He's not in a good humor to-day, that's what ails him," said Frank.

"He's too mean ter breathe, dat's wot's der matter wid him!" exclaimed the boy.

Frank joined Bart, and they started along the street.

"We won't get far before he'll overtake us," said Hodge.

"What for?"

"To get some money. You didn't give him anything, did you?"

"No."

"I thought not. He won't let you get away. When he finds you really mean to go, he'll follow you up."

"We'll see," said Frank. "I think you have made a mistake in your estimate of the boy. Of course, I have heard of such games as you thought he was playing, but I believe that youngster was honest. There was something honest about his face and his manner."

"Look here, Frank! You are a fellow who always seems to want to think people honest."

"I do. I had much rather think a man honest than otherwise. It is a great satisfaction."

"It may be a great satisfaction at the start, but, in nine cases out of ten, there will be disgust when you find you have made a fool of yourself."

"According to that, you estimate that nine men out of ten are dishonest?"

"Oh, well, you may be right; but I'm no reformer, and——"

"And you must confess that it is not pleasant to be constantly suspected of crookedness."

"That's right," said Bart, reluctantly. "I think I ought to know, for I suppose I have been suspected as much as any living person ever was, without real cause for suspicion."

"And that very thing has led you to suspect others.

Have you forgotten that boy? Where is he? He hasn't followed me."

"That's so," acknowledged Bart, in surprise, turning about.

Frank stopped and turned, also.

In front of the Hotel Metropole, the urchin was on his hands and knees, searching in the gutter. He seemed to have forgotten both Frank and Bart.

"What do you say about him now?" laughed Merry.

"He's either honest, or he's pretty clever," said Bart; "and it's more than likely that he's the latter. You were not the only one who saw him, and he knew it. He selected the best place he could to work his little game, and that's in front of Denver's finest hotel, the Metropole. Rich people stop there, and he hopes to catch some one easy. He refuses to strike low. He means to have a 'V.' He knew he would not get more than a quarter out of you, if he followed you, and so he stays there."

"Well, Bart," said Merry, as they walked onward again, "I should hate to be as cynical and suspicious as you are. I had much rather regard people generally as honest, even though I am fooled occasionally."

"All right. You go on thinking everybody honest, and I'll go on holding everybody dishonest till they are proven otherwise, and you'll lose dollars where I'll lose cents."

They walked onward, chatting and arguing as they went.

It was nearly an hour later when they returned that way. As they came in sight of the Metropole, Frank exclaimed:

"Well, the boy is there now! He's still searching!"

"Yes," nodded Bart. "He hasn't found either his five dollars, or his easy mark yet."

A man wearing a silk hat halted near the boy, and spoke to him. The man carried a cane, with which he poked about in the gutter. All at once, he stooped and picked something up.

Frank and Bart were near enough to hear the boy give a cry of joy, as he sprang to his feet.

"Dat's it, mister—dat's der five dollars I losted! Give it ter me!"

"Get out!" exclaimed the man, pushing the boy away. "You never saw five dollars before, you ragged, little dog! I'll keep this."

"Hello!" exclaimed Frank, quickening his steps. "I know that gentleman."

"Don't call him that," protested Hodge. "He's anything but a gentleman."

"It's Leslie Lawrence."

"Sure thing."

"He has found the five-dollar gold piece the boy lost."

"Honest, I hope ter die if dat ain't mine!" cried the boy, excitedly. "I losted it right here, an' was huntin' fer it w'en youse come along. I told yer so—you knows I told yer so!"

He caught Lawrence by the elbow, in his anxiety, but the man shook him off, snarling:

"Don't touch me with your dirty hands, you little brat! If you do, I'll give you a good caning!"

"It won't be good for him to hit the boy with that cane

while I am around!" growled Hodge. "If he does, I'll knock his head off!"

"Is it possible your sympathy for the dishonest, little rascal has been aroused?" asked Frank, mockingly.

"It begins to look as if the boy's honesty has been proven," admitted Hodge, "and that puts another aspect on affairs. Lawrence must not get away with that money!"

"All right; we won't let him get away."

"Hit me wid yer cane, if yer wants to!" the boy cried, desperately; "but ye've gotter gimme dat money, 'cos it b'longs ter me!"

"Get out!" snapped Lawrence, trying to hurry away.

He came face to face with Hodge and Merriwell, the former blocking his path squarely, and saying:

"Hold on, you! Don't be in such a hurry!"

"Get out of my way!" commanded the actor.

"When you have given the boy his money!" said Bart without moving.

"What are you talking about?"

"That money you have in your hand!"

"You fool! How could a ragged kid like that have so much money? Get out of the way, or I'll cane you!"

"If you will strike me once with your cane, I'll be very much pleased!" declared Bart, fiercely. "Please hit me! I want some excuse for punching you!"

Frank was standing back now, watching Hodge, with something like a faint smile of appreciation and satisfaction on his handsome face.

The ragged urchin was astonished. Plainly, Hodge

was the last person from whom he would have expected assistance, and he was wondering if he was dreaming.

Lawrence was very angry, but he refrained from hitting Hodge.

"You talk pretty big!" he sneered; "but it is because you know Merriwell is at hand to stand in with you! You are two to my one, and that gives you great courage."

"I'll guarantee that Frank Merriwell will not interfere," said Bart, swiftly. "It won't be necessary. I've wanted to mix up with you for some time, and this is a great opportunity. Just crack me with your stick, Lawrence!"

"I shall call a policeman!"

"Do! We'll see that you are turned over to him for robbing this boy!"

"Bah! Any policeman will know that the boy would not have a five-dollar gold piece."

"You know he had it," said Frank, quietly. "He told you so when he came along. You can't deny that."

"I do deny it!" said Lawrence, desperately.

"Then you lie! Why did you stop here and go to poking in the gutter with your cane?"

"None of your business!"

"I did tell him I'd losted der money!" cried the urchin. "He knows I did. He found it der first t'ing!"

"We happen to know that the money belongs to the boy," said Frank.

"How do you know so much?" asked Lawrence, sneeringly.

"Because we came along here some time ago, and he told us about losing it. We stopped to help him look for

it, but went on without finding it. We were in sight when you stopped. We saw you poke in the gutter with your cane, and saw you pick the money up."

"And we'll see you give it back to the boy!" finished Hodge.

"Not to-day!" declared Lawrence, defiantly.

"Well, you have fallen pretty low when you take to robbing boys!" cried Frank. "I declare, I didn't think that—not even of you!"

"You want to be careful what you say to me!" grated the actor.

"Yes, be careful, Frank!" cried Bart. "He'll get excited and chew his tongue off. He won't dare do anything else."

"I'll dare do something to you, when the right time comes!" scowled Lawrence. "I have hated you from the time you joined Merriwell's company, and this little affair is not lessening that hatred a bit!"

"I'd rather you'd hate me than not!" shouted back Bart. "The hatred of such chaps as you is preferable to their friendship. The man with whom you are friendly is sure to be a scoundrel, and is pretty sure to be a coward—like yourself!"

Bart could not have said anything that would have cut Lawrence deeper. The man's face became livid, and he shook with fury. For some moments he was unable to say a single word in retort.

The boy edged up to Frank, saying:

"Jimminy! dat feller wot I took fer a stiff is a corker!

Why, he'd ruther fight dan eat, I bet! Golly, he's all right!"

Frank smiled.

"You have found out in a short time what others who have known him for years have not yet discovered," he said.

"Don't let dat bloke git erway wid me money!" implored the boy.

"You won't lose anything if he gets away with it," assured Frank. "But Bart will fight before he'll let him get away."

"My! but I reckon it's a good t'ing fer me dat youse chaps come along jest as yer did!" exclaimed the lad. "I'd 'a' losted dat five fer keeps dis time if yer hadn't!"

"I believe you would," nodded Frank.

Lawrence glared at Bart.

"You crow loud!" he said; "but you'll sing a different tune some day!"

Frank stepped forward.

"See here, Lawrence," he said, decisively, "we know that money belongs to the boy, and we'll have you arrested if you do not give it up, so there is no use trying to keep it!"

"I won't be bulldozed!"

"But, begobs, ye'll be arristed av ye don't give th' b'y his money at wance!" cried a voice behind Lawrence.

With an exclamation of alarm, the actor jumped aside and whirled round.

No one was near him.

He had been thrown off his guard by a ventriloquial trick worked by Merry.

A hand fell on his wrist, another hand wrenched open his fingers, and the gold piece was taken from him before he could recover.

"Here is your money, my boy," said Frank, handing the shining piece to the lad, who grasped it and scudded away as fast as his feet would carry him.

CHAPTER XIV.

LAWRENCE HAS HIS TURN.

Almost frothing at the mouth, Lawrence whirled back and aimed a savage blow at Frank's head with his cane.

Hodge was on the watch. He caught the cane, snatched it from the man's grasp, broke it over his knee, and flung the pieces aside.

"Two to one—two to one!" panted Lawrence.

"No; one to one!" blazed Hodge, squaring away at Leslie. "Now I will thump you!"

Frank caught hold of him.

"Not here! Look—we have attracted attention. You do not want to be arrested for engaging in a street fight!"

"Wouldn't care a rap if I could say I licked this cur!" palpitated Bart, who was thoroughly aroused.

"Well, I'd care. See, here comes a policeman."

The officer came up quickly.

"What's the matter here?" he asked, sharply.

"These fellows have assaulted and robbed me right here on the street!" declared Lawrence, pointing to Frank and Bart. "I want them arrested, Mr. Officer."

"What's this?" exclaimed the policeman, regarding Frank and Bart. "They do not look like footpads."

"I make a charge against them, and it's your duty to arrest them. They took five dollars from me. They can't deny it. I attempted to defend myself with my cane, but

they broke the cane and flung it out there into the street."

"This is a serious charge," said the officer, gravely. "Are you prepared to stand behind it?"

"Of course I am prepared to stand behind it!' cried Lawrence, with eager triumph. "I'll go right along with you to the station and make a charge against them. I am stopping at the Oxford, and my name is Lawrence."

"We do not deny it," smiled Merry; "but we can explain——"

"You can make your explanations to the judge," said the policeman.

Then he asked Lawrence if there were any witnesses.

A man advanced from the crowd that had gathered, saying:

"Yes, sir; I saw it all. I am stopping here at the Metropole. You may have heard of me. I am Kent Carson."

"The cattleman?"

"Yes."

"I know you," nodded the officer, with a show of respect. "Your evidence will be very valuable, sir. You saw these young men take the money from this gentleman?"

"I did," answered Kent Carson, quietly.

"I think your evidence will be quite enough to convict them," said the policeman, grimly. "Come along, my bold footpads. There has been quite enough of this sort of work around this place nights; but I must say you chaps

are the boldest yet to try it in the daytime, and right in front of this hotel!"

"Mr. Officer," said Frank, quietly, "there has been a mistake. If you will——"

"But I won't!" cut short the policeman. "I told you you could explain to the judge. He'll settle your case."

Then, taking Merry and Hodge by the arm, he started for the station, directing Lawrence and Carson to come along. A crowd followed.

"Well, Bart," said Frank, laughing, "what do you think of this?"

"I think it's a thundering outrage!" exploded Hodge; "and somebody shall pay for it!"

Lawrence laughed.

"Oh, you think it an outrage to be arrested for robbing a man in broad daylight!" he sneered, triumphantly. "You had your turn a while ago; it's my turn now."

"Steady, Bart!" warned Frank, as he saw Hodge was on the verge of losing his self-control at the jeers of the taunting rascal. "You'll make matters worse, if you try it."

"But I can't stand it!" muttered Bart, furious. "To think of being arrested for robbery on the charge of such a whelp sets my blood boiling!"

"Your blood will have a chance to cool down in jail," said Lawrence. "Oh, you are in for it now!"

He was enjoying his unexpected triumph to the full extent.

"Keep quiet, all of you, till we get to the station house,"

ordered the officer. "You'll have a chance to do some talking there."

"This is the worst blunder you ever made!" exclaimed Hodge, who found it impossible to suppress his indignation. "You will find it out, too!"

Again he was ordered to keep still, this time in no very mild manner, and thus they tramped along till the police station was reached.

They were soon before the sergeant, and the policeman explained that he had made the arrest on complaint of Lawrence. The sergeant asked Lawrence to make his charge, and the fellow did so, claiming that he had been held up and robbed by Frank and Bart directly in front of the Hotel Metropole.

"When did this occur?" asked the sergeant.

"A short time ago," was the bold answer. "The officer arrested the wretches immediately after the robbery."

"What!" cried the sergeant at the desk. "You don't mean that they held you up in broad daylight?"

"I mean just that, sir," asserted Lawrence. "It was a bold and daring robbery."

"I should say so! Why, I can hardly credit it! I presume you have witnesses?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know the culprits?"

"Yes."

"You do? This is interesting!"

"They are two cheap actors, or would-be actors," the

triumphant rascal explained. "That one there," pointing to Frank, "has been playing the leading part in a stolen play till lately. The rightful owner of the play stopped him from performing in Cripple Creek, and, in order to keep out of jail, he pledged himself not to appear in the piece any more. He then took this fellow with him and ran away, deserting his entire company, who were left penniless and destitute in Cripple Creek."

"Well, of all the liars I ever heard!" exploded Bart, in amazed indignation.

"Silence!" commanded the sergeant, rapping the desk. "You will be given a chance to speak." Then, turning to Lawrence again: "You seem to know all about the affair. How does that happen?"

"I was one of the company," answered Leslie.

"Then you are an actor?"

"Yes, sir; I am a professional actor. Those fellows are fakes."

"You managed to reach Denver, after being left penniless in Cripple Creek?"

"Oh, you see—that is—I—had saved some money. I was expecting just what happened, and so I came out of it better than the others."

"I see," nodded the sergeant.

Then he turned to Frank, asking:

"What is your name, young man?"

"Frank Merriwell, sir."

"Your occupation?"

"I am staging a play just at present."

"Staging a play?"

"Yes; rehearsing it, and getting it ready to go on the road."

"Do you know this gentleman?" motioning toward Lawrence.

"I know that man," answered Frank.

"Don't call him a man!" hissed Hodge, under his breath. "It's an insult to real men!"

"You have heard this accusation against you. What have you to say to it?"

"That it is wholly and entirely false!" rang out Frank's clear voice.

Lawrence laughed sneeringly.

"What happened in front of the Hotel Metropole?" asked the sergeant.

"This fellow," said Frank, motioning toward Lawrence, "picked up a five-dollar gold piece from the gutter, where it had been lost by a boy, who was searching for it at the time. He was attracted by the sight of the boy, who was crying as he searched, and he paused to ask the little fellow what ailed him. The boy told him, and this man found the money immediately afterward. He then attempted to pocket it, refusing to give it to the boy. I caught hold of his wrist, took the money from him, and returned it to the boy. That is the whole story, and it is perfectly straight, sir."

"Where is this boy?" demanded the sergeant.

"Right here, mister!" piped a shrill voice, and the ragged, dirt-stained youngster pressed forward. "I'm der feller wot losted der money, an' ev'ry word dis here gent has told yer"—with a wave of his hand toward Frank —"is der dead level trute."

For a moment it seemed that the tables had been turned on Lawrence, but the brazen rascal was not feazed in the least. He laughed scornfuly, derisively.

"How is that for nerve, sergeant?" he asked. "Take a look at the kid, and see what you think about such a ragamuffin having five-dollar gold pieces to lose! The boy was standing near, and saw me pick the money up. You know what such street urchins are. He claimed it in a minute. Not five minutes before, the same boy asked me for a nickel, telling a pitiful tale about a sick father at home and starving brothers and sisters. You know the kind of games they work, Of course, I didn't give him the money."

The sergeant looked the boy over, shaking his head doubtfully.

"Don't yer believe dat stiff!" cried the urchin. "Why, he's der biggest liar on two legs! I never asked him fer a cent in all me life! It's true dat me fadder is sick to home. Marm sent me out wid dat money ter buy med'cin' fer him."

"Now, isn' that a likely story!" sneered Lawrence. "Look at the boy. Anyone can see that he is lying!"

"Anyone can see dat you're a big guff!" cried the lad. "If 'tadn't bin fer dese fellers, you'd swiped dat shiner.

You're der feller wot der judge behind der desk dere wants ter put in jail!"

"How does it happen that you came here, boy?" asked the sergeant.

"I saw der cop marchin' me friends off, an' I jest follered, ter find out wot was der matter. I alwus sticks by me friends, sure's me name's Tim Tuttle."

"Well, you may tell just what happened in front of the Metropole."

The boy did so, beginning with the loss of the money, and relating how Frank and Bart came along and Merry stopped to talk with him and try to help him find the lost coin, although Bart ridiculed his friend for taking any stock in the boy's story. Then he explained how Frank had promised to come back and help him search, but Lawrence came along before Merry returned.

"He asked me wot I was snufflin' about," continued the lad, "an' I told him I'd losted five dollars right dere. He laughed kinder doubtin' like, but poked round wid his cane. Den, all to oncet, he stooped over, an' I seen him pick up der shiner. I jumped up an' tole him it was der one wot I losted, but he told me ter git out of dat.

"Den I ketched holt of his arm, an' he give me a push, and said he'd t'ump me wid his cane if I touched him wid me han's ag'in. He was jest goin' ter git, w'en dese friends of mine came erlong ag'in, an' stopped him. Dey told him der money b'longed ter me, an' dat he'd better cough it up ter me.

"He allowed he wouldn't do no coughin', an' dat made

dis feller wot t'ought I was a fake in der first place so mad dat he wanted ter fight, but der odder fellow, wot t'ought I was all right all der time, he wouldn't let him fight. Den somethin' funny happened. Somebody seemed ter holler right behind der feller wot had my shiner dat der money b'longed ter me, an' he'd better give it up, if he didn't want ter git arrested; but I didn't see nobody near ter do der hollerin', an' w'en der bloke jumped an' turned round, he didn't see nobody, needer.

"Right den dis gent wot took stock in me all along, he grabs der cove by der wrist an' takes der money outer his hand quick as a wink an' gives it ter me. Den I legs it in a hurry, an' der next I sees der cop was marchin' me friends off here. Dat's der whole story, judge, an' it's on der dead level."

The boy rattled this off in a hurry, and there was something about his manner that seemed to proclaim that he was telling nothing but the truth.

Again Lawrence laughed.

"Pretty clever for such a dirty, little rascal, but they become shrewd after they have made money a while by their wits," he said.

The sergeant gave him a sharp look.

"Where are your witnesses, sir?" he asked.

"Here is the only witness I have," was the answer, as Lawrence indicated Kent Carson.

The cattleman stepped forward, and the official at the desk asked his name. Immediately on hearing it, the sergeant showed great respect for the rancher.

"Mr. Kent," he said, "you happen to know something about this affair?"

"I do," said Kent.

"You saw these young men take the money from Mr. Lawrence?"

"I did."

"Where were you at the time?"

"I was at the window of the Metropole. I had been watching the boy for an hour, at least. At first I thought he was up to something crooked, and I was interested to know what success he had at his game. I heard him tell this young gentleman, Mr. Frank Merriwell, about losing the gold piece. I saw this man"—indicating Lawrence by a gesture—"come along and pick up the money. I thought he would give it to the boy, as he looks respectable, but he would have carried it away had not the ones he has accused of robbing him stopped him. They did take the money away from him and return it to the boy, which they were justified in doing. The money did not belong to him, and he knew it belonged to the boy."

This was a thunderbolt for Lawrence. The fellow turned pale, and seemed stricken dumb.

Bart Hodge turned and looked at him. Hodge seldom laughed aloud, and he did not do so now, but the contemptuous smile on his face was cutting, indeed.

Tim Tuttle gave a whoop of delight.

"Dat's der stuff!" he squealed, dancing about. "Now, you has it straight, Mr. Judge! Wot d'yer t'ink about it now?"

Lawrence tried to force a laugh, but it was a failure.

He started to say something, but stopped, realizing that the sergeant was looking straight at him, in a grim and forbidding manner.

Of course, there was a stir among the spectators and listeners. The officer who had made the arrest muttered:

"Well, I'll be hanged!"

"Mr. Lawrence," said the official at the desk, "don't you think you'd better withdraw your complaint?"

Lawrence stiffened up.

"Of course not!" he blustered. "Why should I?"

"Because it may be better for you. Everything will go against you. There may be a charge preferred against you. You may be placed under arrest."

Now Lawrence showed alarm, but he attempted to make a bluff.

"Oh, well, it's plain you've all been fooled by this ragged, little runt!" he cried. "I'll withdraw the charge. I can't do any different. But the whole thing is an outrage!"

"That will do!" said the sergeant, sternly. "You may consider yourself fortunate if you get off without trouble, for it is plain you tried to confiscate the boy's money. Mr. Merriwell was warranted in taking it from you and restoring it to the little fellow, and I compliment him on his action. You may go, and I advise you to get out of here at once."

Lawrence made haste to do so, not even turning back to cast a revengeful look at Frank or Bart.

"You are at liberty to go, young gentlemen," said the sergeant, nodding toward Merriwell and Hodge.

Frank turned to Kent Carson.

"Mr. Carson," he said, "we owe you many thanks. It was very fortunate for us that you could corroborate our statement, for your word bore weight."

"You owe me nothing, young man," returned the cattleman. "I saw you were in trouble, and I resolved to help you out. I thought it best to do so here at the station, rather than tell the whole story to the officer. That's all. I wish to compliment you for the manner in which you took the money from that rascal and restored it to the boy."

He held out his hand, which Frank grasped. Then he shook hands with Hodge.

"Whoop!" cried Tim Tuttle, turning a handspring. "Dis is great! And der villain got it w'ere der chicken got der ax!"

CHAPTER XV.

"BORN AN ACTOR."

Frank, Bart and Mr. Carson left the police station together.

"I don't suppose," said the rancher, as they walked along, "that you can be a relative of a fellow by the name of Merriwell who is in Yale?"

He looked at Frank as he asked the question.

"I do not think there is anybody by that name in Yale college now," said Frank.

"How is that? I have a boy there. He's a sophomore, now. He wrote me a lot of stuff about a chap named Merriwell when he first entered college. Seemed to have Merriwell on the brain. Said this Merriwell was a great baseball player, and the greatest halfback, quarter-back, or three-quarters back on the football team. He seemed to be thinking a great deal more about Merriwell than he was about his studies. I didn't know but you were some relation to the fellow."

Frank laughed, pleasantly.

"I think I am the only Merriwell who has attended Yale for a number of years."

"You?"

"Yes."

"Were you at Yale?"

"I was last year."

"Did you play baseball?"

"I pitched on the regular Yale nine."

"And football?"

"I was fullback on the eleven."

"Why, then you must be the very chap my boy raved over so much! This is rather remarkable. Have you graduated?"

"No; through misfortune I was forced to leave college before I finished my course."

"And you are in the show business?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'm glad to have met you, young man, and I am pleased to know I could be of service to you. If you ever come my way, call on me at the Twin Star Ranch, and be sure you'll be welcome."

"Thank you, sir. It is very kind of you to give me the invitation. I doubt if I shall be able to accept it, but I assure you it is appreciated just the same."

They parted from the rancher, who wished them good luck. Not till they had walked on some distance did Frank notice that a person was following them closely. Looking round, he saw it was Tim Tuttle, the ragged urchin whom he had befriended.

"Hello, my boy!" exclaimed Merry, cheerfully. "Anything more I can do for you?"

"No, sir," answered the urchin, "but I jest wanted ter say somethin' ter dat friend of yourn."

"To me?" asked Bart, in surprise.

"Yes, sir."

"What do you want to say to me?"

"I wants ter beg yer pardon, sir."

"For what?"

"Fer makin' der talk erbout ye dat I did when you fust came along where I was huntin' fer der money."

"What was that?"

"I reckon I called yer stiff, ur somethin' like dat, because you t'ought I was tryin' ter play a skin game. I 'lows it may hev seemed dat way ter you den, an' now I know dat you ain't no stiff, fer you did talk straight ter dat bloke wot tried ter swipe der shiner. Golly! I did like ter hear ye talk ter him, an' I reckons you kin back up all ye say. If you ain't a fighter from der word go, I ain't no judge. I bet you could lick dat feller in less dan a minute."

Something like a smile crept over Bart's usually stern face.

"It is very agreeable to know that you have such a good opinion of me," he said; "and, now that you have been so ready to take back what you said, it's only fair that I should retract."

"Wot's dat?"

"Take back what I said."

"Aw, fergit it!"

"No. I believe I called you a rascal, and things like that. You are not a young rascal, and I apologize. Is that all right?"

"I guess yes!" cried the boy, with great satisfaction. "Dis has put us on der even. If I kin ever do anyt'ing fer you fellers, you bet I'll do it."

"All right, Tim," smiled Frank. "Have you got that medicine for your father?"

"Sure t'ing. Here it is—see! An' here's der change wot I got back outer der five."

"I suppose you are taking that home to your mother?"

"You bet! Ain't no tellin' w'en dad'll git ter work ag'in, an' I rather reckon we'll need der coin afore he does."

"Well, here is a dollar for you," and Frank snapped a silver dollar toward the lad, who skillfully caught it on the fly.

"And here is another," said Bart, with unusual generosity, following Merry's example. "Take that as a balm for the wounds I inflicted."

"Golly!" shouted the urchin, his eyes bulging. "Ain't I in luck? Well, I reckon! I'll take der whole business home ter mother, an' den she won't raise no row 'cause I was so long erway gittin' der med'cine. Thank yer, gents! May ye alwus have money ter t'row round. Good-by."

Away he went on a run, laughing as he sped along, the happiest boy in Denver at that minute.

"There," said Frank, "I'm glad I was able to give him that, but I wish it had been more."

"Me, too," said Bart, to Merry's surprise. "I didn't know it made a fellow feel so good to give away money."

"The pleasure of giving is one of the greatest pleasures of life," declared Merry. "If we can be sure we are giving in a good cause, we are almost certain to feel great satisfaction in being generous. There may be pleasures in avarice and meanness, but it cannot compare with the pleasure of bestowing something that is needed on the deserving. Such gifts are not extravagance, either."

"I don't know that I ever tried it before to see how it felt," admitted Bart; "but I am pretty sure I shall try it again. It was a new sensation for me."

Thus had Frank, by example, taught Hodge one of the greatest pleasures. Bart's hard face had grown soft and pleasant to look upon, the satisfaction he felt in his heart over doing a good deed showing in his countenance.

"Well, this has been quite an adventure," laughed Frank. "Lawrence thought he had the best of us, but he got it in the neck at the end."

"What did such a fellow care for that?" exclaimed Hodge, his face hardening again. "He did not get what he deserved. He should have been arrested and jailed."

"I should think he'd get tired and give up trying to do me a dirty turn," said Frank. "He never comes out well."

"But he means to stick to it till he does, and, when a fellow is so persistent, he is liable to accomplish something in time. I have despised Lawrence ever since the night I had the trouble with him in the dressing room. I sized him up then and there. He was with the company you joined originally, and he was leading man. It has made him sour and bitter to see you advance so swiftly while he has not made any progress. He has tried to keep his bitterness down, because he wanted the money he was receiving; but all along he has thought he could play your part in your piece far better than you did it. He is just that conceited."

"Well, you must acknowledge that Lawrence is a pretty good actor?"

"He is good in an artificial way. He is stagey. He

stalks, and he has set gestures. He presses his hand to his forehead and passes it backward over his hair when he wants to be 'intense.' He poses at every opportunity, it makes no difference whether the situation admits of a pose or not. I do not think he ever feels an atom of the emotions he tries to depict on the stage."

"That is making it rather broad, Bart."

"None too broad. You, Frank, are a natural actor. Your gestures are perfectly natural, and your poses, although always graceful, are almost always unconscious. You feel the emotions the character is supposed to feel, and you make it seem like real life. That is the secret of your success on the stage. The audience forgets that you are acting and feels those emotions with you."

"You must have been making a study and comparison of Lawrence and myself," laughed Merry.

"No. Anyone with any discernment could not help seeing what I have said is true. If it were not true, how could you have succeeded as a star? You have never taken a course at any dramatic school, and you have not had sufficient experience on the stage to stand where you do now. You were born an actor, Frank."

"Born an actor!" exclaimed Frank. "That would be a good title for a story."

"Great Scott!" cried Hodge. "I hope you are not thinking of going to writing stories?"

"Hardly—just at present, anyway."

"I didn't know. There is no telling what you will do next."

In a little hall in Denver where there was a working

stage, Frank Merriwell's new company had gathered for rehearsal. Frank and Bart entered, after climbing three flights of stairs, and found Havener, the stage manager, drilling several of the people on a certain situation.

"Look here, Fowler," Havener was saying, "I want you to do it just as I tell you, and you must do it the same way each time. You seem to like to vary the way you jump on that chair. Variety may be the spice of life, but don't get too much spice into that little piece of business. Your ideas may be a great deal better than mine, but while I am stage manager, my ideas go. Do you tumble?"

Lloyd Fowler, a young and rather conceited actor, admitted that he did.

"All right, then," nodded the stage manager. "Now we'll go over it again." And then he proceeded to put the young actor through his paces.

Others of the company were gathered about, one or two being on the stage, as they were required in the scene Havener was rehearsing.

In a corner Billy Wynne—"Props"—was whispering eagerly to Stella Stanley, who played the heavy lead. Billy was a little fellow, but he seemed to have formed a violent admiration for Stella, who was tall and stately. She was listening to him with an indulgent smile of superiority, as if she regarded him as an amusing boy, nothing more.

Hodge noticed them the moment he entered the hall, and he scowled, muttering to Frank:

"Now, wouldn't that jar you? That little pinch hangs

round her all the time. I believe he thinks he's made an impression there!"

Frank smiled a bit.

"What ails you?" he said. "What do you care?"

"Oh, I don't care," declared Bart.

"You say you don't, but——"

"Why should I?"

"Stella Stanley is rather fascinating."

"But I don't take any stock in women. I'm sore on them all."

"You were not once. I can remember the time when you took an interest in pretty girls."

"Oh, I was a young fool then. They never took any interest in me, and I'm glad of it! When a fellow gets to thinking of girls, he becomes a good, soft thing. He'll make a fool of himself on every occasion possible, and when he does not make a fool of himself, the girls he thinks so much of will make a fool of him. Girls delight in making fellows appear foolish. No matter how much a fellow may do for a girl, if he happens to make a bad break, she'll go straight and tell her girl chum of it, and they'll laugh over it in the most heartless manner. He'll be dead lucky if they don't turn round and spread the yarn as far and as fast as they can, making him an object of ridicule everywhere he is known. I tell you, a girl has no sense of gratitude or of decency in the way she treats a fellow."

All the time he was saying this, Bart was looking aslant at Stella Stanley, a scowl on his face, at the same time snapping his fingers nervously and softly.

Frank was studying him. For two days he had observed a change in Bart's manner. Two days before Stella Stanley had come to the first regular rehearsal and Bart had seen her. Frank did not know that they had ever spoken to each other, except in their regular business on the stage.

Merry was surprised to hear Bart express himself in such a long speech. In the past Hodge had been given to few words. Of late he talked more of certain things. He did not seem to care to discuss a pleasant subject, but he often gave vent to skyrocket opinions on subjects that seemed to thoroughly annoy and anger him.

In the old days at Fardale, Bart had sought favor in the eyes of the pretty girls he met—had sought it, but had not found it. There was something about him that the girls did not seem to like, and he was not popular with them, no matter how much he tried to be.

In those days he was reckless enough to win the admiration of almost any girl, and it is often the case that recklessness and a spice of wickedness will win admiration from a girl who is perfectly good and respectable herself, but who does not seem to care for the best fellow alive in case he never does anything shocking.

It is not the openly reckless and wicked who wins the admiration of the girls, but it is the one about whom wicked things are whispered and hinted—who, it is said, has done such terrible things, but who has never been caught at it. There must be no proof; only suspicion in general.

But let the lad who seeks to win feminine admiration

in such a manner beware, for he is much more likely to win a pair of iron bracelets. And the moment he has won those, let him bid farewell to all hope of ever becoming a girl's hero. The stigma will remain upon him; no matter how much he may try to shake it off, it will cling.

Note well that it is not the fellow who tries to win the admiration of the girl by recklessness and spicy wickedness who succeeds. It is the one who does not care a rap whether he is admired or not. The fellow who seeks to win admiration in such a manner is a fake; he knows it himself, and somehow it is discovered by the girls whom he hopes to attract. It must be intuition or instinct that tells them, and then they regard the fakir with contempt.

In his boyhood days Bart Hodge had been no fakir; he had not been wicked and reckless for the purpose of winning feminine admiration. But there had been something about him which repulsed girls. He so seldom laughed, and he was so somber and cynical.

If a girl has anything to do with a rascal, she likes one who laughs. He must be a rollicking rascal.

But not even the rollicking rascal can hold his own with the honest, square, manly, lion-hearted fellow who meets temptation, but is not tempted; who is never swerved from the straight course; who can always hold his head erect and look every man straight in the eye; who does not court danger for notoriety, but never quakes or hesitates when the time comes that he must face peril.

It is the honest, unswerving fellow who makes friends worthy to be called friends—friends who never desert him. Such friends Frank Merriwell had made.

"Oh, you are a trifle hard on the girls, old fellow," laughed Merry, in response to Bart's cynical and bitter arraignment of the opposite sex. "Now, don't you think you are?"

"Not a bit," returned Hodge, stiffly.

"You must confess that all girls are not devoid of a sense of gratitude."

"Won't confess anything of the sort."

"I have known girls——"

"Name them."

"Inza——"

"Well, she's the last one I thought you'd name! Why, she made a nice display of gratitude, didn't she? She's engaged to be married to a Harvard fop——"

"Which same Harvard fop, you must confess, has the qualities of a man about him."

"Well, he proved more of a man than I thought possible, but that doesn't make her case any different. I think she called you a coward because you didn't prevent the Harvard chap from getting a whipping after he engaged in a fight with Big Pete. Now, wasn't that gratitude? You risked your life at Fardale to save her from the jaws of a mad dog. You saved her from being crushed to death beneath the wheels of an express engine, after I, like a cur, had leaped out of the carriage and abandoned her to her fate. And now she had the nerve to call you a coward! Oh, yes, that was gratitude! For Heaven's sake, don't speak of her again!"

"You don't quite understand the situation," said Frank, soberly. "You do not understand Inza."

"Admitted. I do not understand any human being who could be so ungrateful."

"But Inza had resolved to give Elsie a clear field, and she was trying to make Elsie believe that she had tired of me."

"Bah! Rot! She told that story to clear herself, after she realized that she had put herself in a mighty bad light. Take my word for it, Frank, she is like all other girls—utterly mean and ungrateful."

"All other girls! Well, you are going it pretty broad, even for you. There's Elsie——"

"Thought you'd name her. What about her? You do not hold her up as a model, do you?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I don't see how you can. Hasn't she quit you? You did everything in your power for her. You found her in hard lines in St. Louis, after the death of her father. She was in the chorus of some theater living on a pittance and bound the same way all chorus girls go—downward. You reached out your hand to her; you made her a star in your own play, almost. She had a part that fitted her perfectly, and she divided the honors with you night after night."

"Much to my satisfaction."

"I don't doubt it!" exclaimed Bart. "You would have been satisfied if she had won all the glory! That's what makes me tired! You would take a back seat for anybody you like. I'll confess that I was jealous of Elsie when, night after night, I heard the audience applauding her as much as they did you. It made me mad because

they had not discernment enough to see that they should have given the bulk of their applause to you."

"Bart, Bart! You may have been jealous of Elsie, and that causes you to feel resentment against her now."

"No, it's not that. She has abandoned you."

"Gone back to her friends in Pittsburg to rest."

"She didn't need rest. You put her on her feet, and you paid her good money. She saved what you gave her, so she had money when the company went to the wall. She was tired of you. When she found that Inza cared for you no more, she suddenly grew tired of you. You wrote a part for her in this new play, but she refused to take it. She showed no sense of gratitude. She is like them all!"

"Now, that will do, Bart!" said Frank, in a low, stern tone. "I won't have you talking about her that way! She was ill, and she needed the rest. Her terrible experience in Ace High unstrung her nerves. When I really understood her condition, I was willing she should go."

"Cassie Lee can't fill the part the way she could."

"No; it was written for Elsie, and Elsie could have filled it perfectly. Cassie Lee will do it well, but she lacks a certain something that Elsie possesses. She can dance, and Elsie could not touch her in that line. But when it comes to singing, although Cassie can sing, she has not half the voice Elsie possessed. There was something irresistibly sweet and magnetic about Elsie's singing. When she sang her 'Wildflower Song' in 'John Smith,' she won the hearts of all who heard her."

"And she would have been a great card for you in this

play. She knew it, yet she left you in the lurch. Oh, don't talk to me about the gratitude of women! I don't want to hear it! They are treacherous all of them! I am done with them!"

"Then you may become a woman hater?"

"I am now."

"Then take your eyes off Stella Stanley," laughed Frank. "It doesn't make any difference to you whether she chats with 'Props' or not."

"Not a bit," declared Bart.

But somehow Frank felt that he knew better.

CHAPTER XVI.

ACTORS' SUPERSTITIONS.

Having drilled Fowler to his satisfaction in certain bits of business, Havener glanced round and saw Frank.

"Been waiting for you, Mr. Merriwell," he said, coming up. "All ready for a full rehearsal. We'll put in the specialties to-day. Pianist is here. How are things going?"

"All right," answered Merry. "The photographer is printing the pictures as fast as he can, and the boards for them will be ready to-morrow morning by ten o'clock, without fail."

"This scheme of yours of advertising mainly by means of photographs, small bills and newspapers will enable us to get the company on the road a week earlier than we could if we were forced to wait for lithos. The printed stand and posters have arrived, so we'll be all right."

"How does the printing look?"

"The posters are well gotten up, and I should say the stand is all right."

"Then I suppose our paper will be going up along the route to-day?"

"Yes, it must have arrived in several towns. Everything is going finely, Merriwell. To judge by appearances, 'For Old Eli' is bound to be a winner."

"How do you like that name for the piece, Havener?"

"Oh, so-so."

"You seem doubtful about it."

"Well, you see it is hard to tell how a name will take with the public."

"'What's in a name?'" quoted Frank.

"Well, there's a heap in a name, especially when it's attached to a play. I have known a poor name to ruin a mighty good play, and a good name to make a very ordinary piece go—for a while, at least."

"What do you consider a good name for a play—I mean, what sort of a name?"

"It's hard to tell just what kind of a name will strike the public fancy, as I said before. A title that might be a fine thing for a story is likely to ruin a play. For instance, I went out with a play once on a time that was called 'The Black Door.' Now that name would have been all right for a story of mystery; it would have attracted attention. It killed the play, although the piece was fairly good. People got to calling it 'The Back Door,' and they derided it on account of its name. The manager saw that something was the matter, but he couldn't tell just what it was.

"The newspapers gave the piece good notices, and people wherever it was played seemed to like it, but it was hoodooed. After a while, it was necessary for the company to go back to New York—to 'reorganize.' Didn't any of us ever expect to go out again with that piece.

"When we got back to New York, the manager held us a week, and then we started out again with the same piece, but the second time we called it 'Millions in

Money.' Well, I'll be hanged if we didn't hit good business with the first night and kept it right up through the season! There was something about the name that drew."

"I suppose people wanted to see 'Millions in Money,' even if they could not have it," laughed Frank.

Cassie Lee came up and listened. Others gathered around.

"Well, we went out with the piece that we had thought a complete failure," said Havener. "It was all in the name, too. 'For Old Eli' sounds all right, Merriwell, but I do not think people generally will understand it. They'll think 'Old Eli' is some character in the piece. Still the name may not do any harm."

"I wanted to give it a name that would take," said Frank. "That name seemed all right to me."

"Well, everything has gone so well that I rather think we're going to win," nodded Havener.

"I have my doubts," put in Agnes Kirk, who played light comedy. "I have a reason for thinking we'll have hard luck."

"What?" cried all the others, turning to her.

She looked a bit startled, but repeated her assertion.

"Why should you think anything like that?" asked Frank.

"Well, for two reasons."

"Name them."

"In the first place, the play has a cast of thirteen characters. That's unlucky."

"Oh, I don't know!" laughed Frank. "Thirteen has been my lucky number in some respects. What's the other reason?"

"You speak the 'tag' of the piece at rehearsals. I noticed that first rehearsal. Never knew a play to prosper when the 'tag' of the piece was spoken at rehearsals."

"You are evidently decidedly superstitious, Miss Kirk," smiled Merry. "I do not think thirteen characters in the cast, or speaking the 'tag,' will kill the piece."

But the actress shook her head ominously.

"Meow!"

"What was that?"

"Sounded like a cat."

"Don't let her come in here!" cried Agnes Kirk. "If she does——"

"Me-e-eow!"

"There she is!"

"She's on the stage!"

A wretched, scrawny, coal-black cat walked out from the wings to the center of the stage. There she stopped and looked around, giving vent to a wail, as if she were in great agony.

"That settles it!" exclaimed Agnes Kirk. "You had better give up trying to put this play on the road, Mr. Merriwell. A black cat on the stage at rehearsal means a dismal failure."

The cat set up a terrible howling.

"Oh, give me a gun!" shouted Billy Wynne. "Give me a brick, and see me smash that cat!"

"Who ever heard such sounds?" burst from Granville Garland.

"Methinks the feline is a-hungered," murmured Douglas Dunton.

Wynne found a stick, used for a cudgel in the play, and started for the stage.

"Now there will be murder!" he shouted. "I'll slaughter the hoodoo!"

Frank stepped forward quickly and caught him by the collar.

"Hold on!" commanded Merry. "You must not touch her."

"Why not?" asked "Props," in surprise.

"Why do you want to harm the poor cat?"

"Why, the sight of such a creature is enough to make a fellow fling a brick at her, not to mention her howling."

"The cat is half starved, and that is why she howls. She is a castaway, a thing of the streets, a homeless wanderer. See, she limps. It is probable that everybody she encounters kicks her out of the way or throws something at her. She has been abused all her life, and she must look on human beings as her natural enemies. I don't understand what it is in a man that makes him long to kick a cat or a fellow being who seems in hard luck. It seems to be the rule of the world. If a creature is on the downward road, kick it along to destruction as fast as you can! You shall not touch the cat, but you shall go out and buy her some milk."

"Wha-a-at?" gasped "Props," in astonishment.

Frank went to the front of the stage and called the cat. The creature seemed inclined to run away in terror, and it howled again. The actors laughed.

"She doesn't seem to take to you much, Mr. Merriwell," said Garland.

Frank paid no attention to this, but called and coaxed the cat. After a little, the creature stopped howling and came nearer. In a few moments Merry was rubbing and patting it.

"Well, I'm hanged if I'd put my hands on a tramp cat!" muttered Lloyd Fowler, shrugging his shoulders, with an expression of disgust.

"Well, I wouldn't like to do it," said Garland. "See, Merriwell has picked the creature up!"

It was true; Frank had taken the cat in his arms, and was talking to her. After a few moments the creature began to realize that it was not to be harmed, and it did not try to get away.

"This cat shall be our mascot, instead of our hoodoo," declared Merry.

"What are you going to do?" asked Agnes Kirk, in apprehension.

"I am going to see that the creature is fed. Here, Wynne, take this money, go to the nearest store where you can find cream, and buy the cat a pint—understand, a pint of cream."

"Cream?"

"Yes."

"Why, milk——"

"I said cream. Tabby's going to have one square feed now, if never again."

"Oh, Lord!" gasped "Props." "Think of buying cream for a cat! What shall I get it in, Mr. Merriwell?"

"There's money enough to buy a dish, and bring something for the cat to eat it from. Hurry, too, for Tabby is hungry!"

"Who ever heard of such a thing?" muttered Granville Garland. "Merriwell must be a crank.

"It's like him," said Bart Hodge, in an aside. "Always gentle and tender-hearted toward every living creature on the face of the earth, and yet he has the courage of a lion. It makes no difference, man or cat, the lower down it is, the more sympathy it seems to awaken in Frank Merriwell's breast."

"I don't understand such a fellow," admitted Garland.

"It would be strange if you did," said Hodge. "I have known him for years, and I do not understand him yet. There is but one thing about him that I do understand, and that is that he is a man every inch of him, with a soul in his body, and I wish I were like him!"

Garland grinned a bit derisively.

"You must be something of a worshiper of him," he said.

"I worship nobody!" said Hodge, sharply; "but I have the sense to know and admire a real man when I see one. Some others haven't. And real men are so scarce."

Wynne departed for the cream.

Frank brought the cat along, the creature clinging to him.

"I have an idea that this is an unusually knowing cat," he said. "It has been abused and beaten about till it presents a wretched appearance; but give it plenty to eat and a good home, and it would be a beautiful creature in a short time."

"Don't bring it near me!" cried Agnes Kirk. "I hate cats, anyway."

"Aw! I wouldn't touch the beast for the world!" declared Granville Garland, backing away. "It's dirty!"

"And you might be if you endured the hard luck this poor cat has seen," smiled Frank, pleasantly.

Garland did not like that.

"No, sir!" he said. "Before I came to that, I'd shoot myself!"

Frank put the cat down, seeing that the door was closed so it could not slip out of the hall. Then the rehearsal began. As Props played a part, he was not needed just then. The first act was nearly played through when Wynne returned with the cream.

The cat had been following Frank about, and now, without delay, he proceeded to turn some of the cream into a tin dish, which Wynne had brought, and give it to her. The manner in which the creature began to lick up that cream gave Frank a feeling of satisfaction. The dish was emptied in short order, filled and emptied again. And the cat did not stop till she had eaten nearly all of the cream bought.

Having satisfied her hunger, the cat sat down on one

end of the stage proscenium and straightway began to clean herself. Now that her stomach was filled, she began to take pride in her personal appearance.

The rehearsal continued. Specialties were to be introduced in the second act. Props could dance, and he was to "do a turn" with Cassie Lee. Havener drilled them at it for some time, the pianist rattling off the music at a signal from the stage manager, and stopping instantly when he gave another signal.

Cassie, Fowler and Merry sang separately, and then there was a quartet, made up of Merriwell, Hodge, Dunton and Fowler.

Frank was sorry that Ephraim Gallup was not on hand to rehearse. Gallup had been called East by the illness of his father, and, as it was uncertain when he could return, an actor by the name of Lester Vance had been engaged to fill his part, with the understanding that the engagement was conditional, depending entirely on the return of the Vermonter.

Vance was regarded as a good Yankee comedian, but Frank did not believe he could touch Gallup in that particular part. Ephraim's acting was perfectly natural, and, therefore, he made a great success of it.

Vance could sing, but he had nothing like Gallup's quaint, Rube song on his list. Wherever "John Smith" had been played, Ephraim's song had "caught on," being whistled and hummed afterward on the streets.

The second act was nearly finished when there came a sudden cry from outside, followed by a scuffle and smothered sounds.

"What's that?" exclaimed several.

"Sounds like a scrap downstairs," said Billy Wynne.

Frank ran to the door and stepped out, looking downstairs.

What he saw on the landing below gave him a shock.

CHAPTER XVII.

ARSON!

In a corner on the landing below something was burning. In the flare of light two persons were struggling on the landing. One was a man; the other a boy.

The man was Leslie Lawrence!

The boy was Tim Tuttle!

The man had the boy grasped by the throat with such a grip that the little follow could make nothing but gurgling sounds, but Tim was fighting with all his puny strength.

"Curse you!" snarled the man. "You followed me here, did you? You would give Merriwell the alarm, would you? Well, you can scorch with Merriwell!"

Then he tried to fling the urchin into the flames, which were rising and spreading swiftly, running along the woodwork of the staircase.

Frank understood in a moment—Lawrence had tracked him there, had found the company was rehearsing above, and had started the fire in the hall.

"Drop that boy!"

Merry uttered the shout.

Lawrence looked up and saw him. The firelight shone full on the face of the man, showing an expression of mingled hatred and terror.

At that moment Leslie Lawrence realized what it meant

if he were captured, and, releasing his hold on Tim, he sought to run away.

But Tim did not let go of him. On the contrary, he held fast to the villain, thickly gurgling:

"No yer don't! I reckon you'll pay fer dis piece of work! I'll hold yer till——"

Lifting his fist, the brute smashed the boy in the face.

Down dropped Tim.

Lawrence whirled and made one leap that took him clean to the bottom of the second flight.

He was barely in time to escape Frank Merriwell, who came bounding down from above.

Merry would have pursued the rascal, but Tim lay there on the floor unconscious, and the fire was spreading with horrible rapidity, so the little fellow could not be abandoned.

Merry caught him up, whirled square about, and went bounding up the stairs to the door of the hall.

The rest of the company came hurrying to the door.

"What is it?"

"A fight?"

"No, a fire!"

"I smell smoke!"

"Fire! fire!"

"Yes, fire!" said Frank. "You must get out in a hurry, or you will not get out at all."

"We can't get out this way now!" cried Garland, as a burst of smoke and flame came rolling up the stairs. "It has cut us off!"

Frank looked back, and saw that the entire stairway seemed in flames.

Into the hall he sprang, closing the door behind him, still bearing the unconscious lad.

"The open door made a draught," he explained. "We'll have to get out some other way."

"There is no other way!" cried Billy Wynne. "We are caught like rats in a trap!"

The girls screamed and ran to the windows, which they flung open, shrieking fire as loudly as they could.

Bart Hodge was the only one who seemed cool.

"How did it happen, Merry?" he asked. "Did the boy set it?"

"No, Lawrence. Boy tried to stop him. Lawrence knocked him stiff."

That was all. Frank did not have time for further words. He realized that they must move in a hurry if they expected to get out of the burning building alive. Smoke was curling under the door. The open windows made a draught through the cracks.

Hodge muttered something savage about Lawrence, but Frank did not listen. He rushed to the one back window, which he threw open, looking out, having placed Tim Tuttle on a bench.

At a distance of about twelve feet was a roof, slightly lower than the window. If the roof could be reached, they might get away and escape.

"But how are the girls to reach that roof?" thought Merry.

He turned back.

"Hodge," he said, "come with me."

"What are you going to do?"

"Come with me!"

Bart did not ask another question, but he followed Frank.

The men of the company seemed scarcely less excited than the girls. Several of them rushed to the window Frank had opened, and then drew back, shouting:

"We can't get out! We can't get out!"

Then the girls shrieked all together.

Frank would have said something to quiet them, but he saw they were in no condition to listen just then, and so he spared his breath.

Outside on the street there were cries of fire. The alarm was striking. Help would soon be at hand.

But at the door of the hall the fire was crackling. Under the door a red tongue shot.

It would not do to depend on the firemen. Perhaps they would not be able to rescue all the company when they arrived.

Behind the scenes Frank plunged. He had seen an ax there, and he found it. He also found an iron bar.

At the very back of the stage was a plank in the flooring that Merry had observed was loose.

"Take that bar, Hodge," he said. "We must get up that plank. It's the only thing that will save us."

They attacked the plank. Frank swung the ax and cut away till Bart could thrust the bar down and use it for a lever. Then they pried up the plank. It came with some difficulty, but they tore it up at last.

Dropping ax and bar, they caught up the plank and managed to swing it round so they could take it off the stage. With it they ran across the hall floor.

"Come on, you chaps," Merry called to the men. "Help us swing this plank across to the roof, and we'll get out of this all right."

They understood at last, and they were so eager to help that they got in each other's way. Havener ordered some of them back, and the others ran the plank out of the window.

"It's too short!" cried Billy Wynne, who was looking on. "It won't reach! We are done for!"

Then he turned to Stella Stanley, saying:

"If we must perish, let us perish together!"

"Get out!" exclaimed the actress, unsentimentally. "We won't perish, though we would for all you could do. Mr. Merriwell will get us out of this. He has brains enough to devise a way."

"I believe you are stuck on him, too!" grated Props, forgetting for a moment the peril they were in. "Everybody seems smashed on that fellow. It beats!"

Frank gave directions for putting the plank out. At last it seemed they could get it no further without dropping it, and still it did not reach the roof.

Merry took a look to make sure it was long enough. Smoke was filling the hall now and rolling out at the open window. The girls were coughing.

"It will go," said Frank. "Steady—all together. We must give it a quick thrust and catch it onto the roof,

without letting this end go off the sill here. Now—let her go!"

They did, and the plank reached the roof. The bridge to safety was made at last.

Lester Vance tried to crowd the others aside so that he would be the first to cross the plank. Frank grasped him by the collar and pulled him back, saying sternly:

"Wait, sir! There is plenty of time. We must look after the girls first."

Vance was pale with fear, but he muttered an angry exclamation, giving Frank a look of rage.

"Hodge," said Merry, "you run back behind the stage and bring me that rope lying on the floor. You saw it."

Without a word, Bart darted away.

"Now, Havener," Merry directed, "if your head is steady, you cross the plank and prepare to hold a guide rope for the girls."

Havener crept out of the window and crossed the chasm on the plank.

By the time the stage manager reached the roof, Hodge came hurrying up with the rope. Frank took it, coiled it swiftly, and shouted to Havener:

"Catch!"

The man on the roof caught the end.

"Now, ladies," said Frank, swiftly, "here is the bridge, and the rope will serve to steady you when you go over. Come on lively, but keep cool while you are crossing."

Agnes Kirk went first, Stella Stanley followed, and then came Cassie Lee. All crossed in safety.

The moment Cassie was over, Lester Vance made another plunge for the plank, scrambled out of the window, and nearly went plunging down between the buildings. Frank caught hold of him, held him till he could get safely onto the board, and then said:

"Steady now. If you were not in such a hurry, you'd stand a better show of getting over all right."

Vance managed to get across, although it was plain that he was giddy from excitement and fear.

Then, directed by Frank, the others took their turns, and all crossed safely.

Frank was left alone in the hall, which now was suffocating with smoke. No, not alone, for on the bench still lay little Tim, who had been so brutally beaten down by the fist of the villain who had set the fire.

Frank picked the boy up in his arms and crept out of the window. Just as he straightened up, something struck on his shoulders.

It was the black cat.

With the boy in his arms and the cat on his shoulders, Merriwell stood erect, unaided by the rope, and walked along the plank to the roof.

From the roof the whole company readily escaped by means of a skylight which led down into the building and to safety.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WARNING.

Frank swore out a warrant that very day for the arrest of Leslie Lawrence. He visited police headquarters and told them all about the man, taking Tim Tuttle with him.

Tim recovered from the blow he had received after a time, but he complained that his head felt wrong. He told how he had followed Lawrence to the building in which Merriwell's company was rehearsing, had watched the man go upstairs, had crept up afterward, and had seen him setting the fire. When he sought to give the alarm, Lawrence caught him.

High and low the police searched for Lawrence, but he had disappeared completely, and was not again seen in Denver.

The company lost very little in the fire except properties, and those were readily replaced.

Two days later, Parker Folansbee, who was backing the company, came on from St. Louis, and the new piece was ready for the road.

Then, unexpectedly, Ephraim Gallup appeared.

"I'm glad you have come, Ephraim," said Frank; "but you'll have to take time to learn your part, so it will be necessary to keep Vance a while. He understands, however, that you were to take his place if you could return."

"Dad's better," said Ephraim, "an' so I didn't stay to hum but jest one day. When I told him haow much I was makin' in the show business, he said fer me to cum right back. Gosh! didn't the fellers daown hum stare at me! Dad had tole all raound that I was travelin' with yeour show, an' they jest thought I was the luckiest critter on two laigs. They've all heerd abaout yeou araound my hum, Frank. It beats all natur' haow menny folks hev heern tell of yeou ev'rywhere. I guess, b'gosh! yeou are abaout the best known feller in the hull United States."

"Oh, I hardly think I'm quite as famous as that," laughed Merry.

"Yes, yeou be," insisted the Vermonter. "Yeou don't never go nowhere that somebody don't know abaout ye. But haow is the new play, anyhow?"

"I believe it will be a winner," said Frank. "See here; there are some notices in the Denver papers. I took the newspaper men in yesterday to see a dress rehearsal, and they have given me some splendid notices."

This was true. The Denver papers had done well by Merry. They pronounced his play a well-constructed and highly interesting piece, and the company of actors thoroughly capable. Merriwell they spoke of in the highest terms as a play writer and actor.

After looking the notices over, Ephraim nodded his satisfaction.

"That's good enough," he said. "Yeou'll make another big hit with 'For Old Eli,' and that will establish yeou as a

writer of plays, by thutter! Yeou'll go back to Yale all right, Frank. I knowed yeou would. When yeou set aout to do a thing yeou alwus git there. Then there's that fortune that's comin' to yeou——"

"To me and the ones who were with me when I made my trip across the continent on a wheel."

"Then yeou're goin' ter divide it with them?"

"Of course I am. It is as much theirs as mine. But there may be no end of delays before we receive that. There is any amount of red tape to the business, and it is barely possible that a relative of Prof. Millard Fillmore may yet be found, in which case the fortune will not come to us at all."

"I don't b'lieve there's any danger of that. If there was any relatives livin', they'd faound um before this. Yeou'll git it all right, Frank."

"But I am not depending on it. If it comes, it will be welcome, but I shall feel all the better if I am able to go back to college through my own efforts."

When Lester Vance learned that Gallup had arrived he was angry.

"Now that is what I call downright mean!" he exclaimed. "I suppose the fellow wants my place in the company?"

"You know I told you how it might be," said Frank. "I am sorry, but I'll do what is right by paying you two weeks' salary extra. That should fix it."

But it did not fix it with Vance. He went round to each member of the company relating his tale of woe,

and coloring the story to suit himself. As he was not very well liked, he received little sympathy. When he started in to tell Hodge about it he was snubbed, and Bart expressed his mind very freely.

Vance went to Frank and asked for his salary in advance. Merry laughed and paid him. In doing so, he made a mistake. When the company started for the town where they were to open with the new play, Vance did not show up.

He had skipped.

Till the last moment Merry looked for Vance, but he was disappointed. The actor had played a shabby trick on him.

"Well, Ephraim," said Frank, after the train had started, "you'll have to play that part to-morrow night. Dig into it. Here is the manuscript. Vance kept the typewritten part."

"Darned ef I won't do my best!" promised the Vermonter; "but it's a heap for me to learn in such short time. If yeou'd made the part shorter, Frank, it'd bin better."

"All I expect of you is to do your best," declared Merry.

The place was reached in due time. For certain reasons, I will not give it by its real name, but will call it Puleob.

Frank found his printing was up on the stands, and the boards of photographs were displayed in the most

prominent windows of the city, while the place had been well small-billed.

Investigation at the box office revealed the fact that there had been a most satisfactory advance sale.

"The people here have heard of you, Mr. Merriwell," said the man in the box office. "A large number of them have asked questions about you. Some boys came round and wanted to know if you were the real Frank Merriwell. Somehow they seemed to think you might be a fake."

Frank laughed.

"I am the only Frank Merriwell I ever knew anything about," he said.

"Are you a Yale man?"

"I was."

"Was?"

"Yes; I am not now. I am an actor."

"Oh, I see. Then I can tell them that there is no doubt but you are the real Frank Merriwell?"

"You may tell them so with absolute truthfulness."

"That will satisfy a great many of them."

Frank went away, wondering how it happened that the people of Puleob should fancy that he was not the genuine Merriwell. Nothing of the kind had happened in other places. He had been accepted everywhere as just what he represented himself to be.

The following morning Hodge came bursting into Merriwell's room at an early hour, greatly excited. Frank was dressing.

"Hello! hello!" he exclaimed. "What is crawling over you? You seem excited."

"Well, I should say I might be!" panted Bart.

"What's the matter?"

"Just take a look at this, and then ask me what's the matter!"

Bart thrust a small bill, or flyer, into Frank's hand. On the bill was printed the following:

"WARNING!

"The citizens of Puleob should not be deceived by the advertisements of a certain fakir calling himself 'Frank Merriwell.' The original and only Frank Merriwell is a student at Yale College, and has no thought or intention of going into the theatrical business. The one traveling around over the country under that name is a fraud and a rascal. He has made a record as a beat wherever he has appeared, and all persons dealing with him should be careful. His play is a pirated piece, and his company a collection of outcasts from the regular stage. Don't throw away your money by going to see an impostor."

"Now what do you think of that?" shouted Bart, savagely. "Isn't that enough to give you cramps?"

"Where did you get this?" asked Frank, calmly.

"Down in the office. It was lying on the writing table."

"Is this the only one you found?"

"Yes, but I found out something."

"What?"

"Duplicates of this were liberally scattered over this city last night."

"Who scattered them?"

"Nobody seems to know."

"Well, I will admit this is interesting," said Frank, as he calmly continued dressing.

Bart sprang up.

"How can you be so cool about it?" he snarled.

"I don't see the good of getting excited."

"There may not be any good in getting excited," exploded Hodge; "but I don't know what a man is made of who will not get up on his hind legs and howl at such a thing as that! Why, it says you are a fraud, a cheat, an impostor!"

"I see it does," nodded Merry, combing his hair.

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"I haven't decided yet. It is probable that I shall try to find out who circulated these things, and, if I can catch the rascal, I shall see that he is punished."

"He ought to be hanged! You must know who did it."

"I presume it is an enemy of mine."

"It isn't likely a friend did it!" shouted the angry Hodge. "Of course it was an enemy! And that enemy was Leslie Lawrence."

"It is very likely."

"Now are you going to let that fellow take a turn at chasing you up and doing his best to knock you out?"

"Not if I can help it," answered Frank, carefully adjusting his necktie. "If I can get hold of Mr. Lawrence, I shall see that he is turned over to the authorities

at Denver, and he will receive his just deserts for setting that fire."

"Now you are talking! He is going to do his best to hoodoo you. You know the members of the company have a notion that the play is hoodooed anyway. It has thirteen characters in the cast, and you spoke the 'tag' at rehearsals. Besides that, the cat——"

"The cat is to be our mascot. Here she is."

Out from beneath the bed walked the same black cat that had appeared on the stage where they were rehearsing in Denver.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" gasped Hodge. "Where'd she come from?"

"I brought her along," explained Frank. "I have a grip arranged for her, with holes in the sides to admit air. I am going to take her everywhere we go. I call her Mascotte."

"Well, that beats all!" said Hodge, weakly. "I didn't know you were superstitious."

"I am not. Anyway, I say I am not. But I want to show that Miss Kirk is wrong about a black cat coming into a theater. It means luck, if it means anything."

"But it doesn't mean luck for you to be advertised in this way," said Hodge, referring to the flyer.

"I don't know. It may arouse the curiosity of people more than anything else could and serve to bring them out. I shall not let it worry me."

"Do you ever let anything worry you?"

"Not if I can help it. What is the use to worry?"

"It may not be any use, but some people can't help it. I am going to do my best to get track of the author of this libel."

Hodge departed, somewhat calmer than when he came in.

As Frank had expected, it seemed that the "warning" served to arouse curiosity more than anything else, and tickets sold fast that day, so that the members of the company were in high spirits as evening approached.

That afternoon they rehearsed on the stage, and the black cat stalked about the place as if she felt quite at home there, much to the horror of Agnes Kirk and the amusement of others. Already the cat was looking sleek and clean and very little like the disreputable-looking creature that had appeared at the rehearsal in Denver.

When the hour arrived for the curtain to rise that evening the house was well filled. But there was anxiety behind the scenes.

Cassie Lee had suddenly been taken ill, but she insisted on playing, even though she could not keep on her feet without difficulty. Frank believed he knew what ailed her. She had taken an overdose of morphine, and the reaction had set in.

Havener gave Lloyd Fowler a calldown for drinking, for Fowler had appeared in a state closely bordering on intoxication.

Gallup was in a terrible state because he had not been able to commit all his lines.

Agnes Kirk was prophesying all sorts of dismal things because of the cat, and the spirits of the entire company had taken a strange and sudden slump.

Frank found this out and went round talking to them and trying to cheer them up. He succeeded in inspiring some of them with fresh confidence, but still the shadow of apprehension hovered over them.

The orchestra played the overture, and then the curtain went up. The new piece was on at last.

Although Frank had concealed his real feelings, he was the most anxious one of the party.

The play started off badly, the first speaker twisting his lines, although he had considered himself letter-perfect. Strangely enough, when a piece starts poorly, it seems difficult to get it to running smoothly. If one person makes a blunder, others seem to catch it from him, and matters go from bad to worse.

Frank had worked a good entrance cue for himself, and, seeing how matters were drifting, he resolved to do his best to go through his part without a break or a skip, hoping that would brace the others up.

When Frank entered, however, he was not given a single "hand," and, to his surprise and dismay, a titter started somewhere in the audience and ran over the entire house. It grew louder till it became an open laugh.

As there was nothing to laugh at in his lines nor his make-up, Merry began to feel uncomfortable. He wondered what the matter could be, and began looking around.

He soon discovered the cause of the laughter.

When he had entered, the cat, Mascotte, had solemnly walked onto the stage at his heels.

Instantly Frank recovered his composure.

"Almost a cat-astrophe," he murmured, and then, after a bit, some of the audience applauded.

CHAPTER XIX.

EVEN IN MISFORTUNE.

But not all Merry could do seemed to straighten things out. The actors were mixed in their lines several times, and it was a relief when the curtain descended on the first act.

There was an ominous silence in the auditorium.

Havener was looking blue enough.

"Cheer up," said Frank. "It may not be true."

"It's a frost," declared Havener, bitterly. "It's not so much your fault, Merriwell. I believe I have failed."

"You?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"The people are not doing their parts well. Something ails them. I am going to give them a going-over, but I'm afraid it won't do them any good. If Kirk don't keep still about thirteen characters, cats and all that stuff, I'll choke her! I've stood all I can of it. She's been the hoodoo. What the company needs is three or four days more of hard work on the piece."

"Well, you'll be able to whip them into shape in a short time, and I reckon Folansbee will be able to stand the pressure if business is bad at the start."

"It is better to start off right, for that gives everybody confidence. There is something the matter with that audience out there. I reckon they've been eating icicles.

Never saw such a cold crowd. Nothing seems to start 'em."

Folansbee came in from the front of the house, and his face showed his disappointment.

"There's something wrong, Merriwell," he said. "The audience is not satisfied. People out there are waiting to see the next act, but they'll be disgusted if it isn't better than the first. This doesn't seem much like 'John Smith.'"

Havener tried to explain that it wasn't so much the play as it was some other things which were going wrong, but it was not easy to convince the man of this.

When the curtain rose on the second act the people on the stage were feeling rather desperate. They went at the piece in a fiery endeavor to play it with vim and snap, but their very desperation served to defeat them. The second act went worse than the first, and, as the curtain came down, there were several hisses from the auditorium.

Those hisses cut Frank like stabs.

He realized that his play was being hissed, and he was cut to the quick. His jaws hardened, and a stern look came into his eyes.

"I'll play this piece in this city some day," he mentally vowed, "and the audience shall call the entire company before the curtain!"

He had little to say as he went to his dressing room to change his clothes for the third act.

In this act Frank and Hodge appeared in Yale baseball suits, as they were supposed to be two members of the Yale ball team. Hodge was dressed first, and he came to

Frank's dressing room. He entered without a word and sat down on Merry's trunk, staring hard at the floor.

"Well," asked Frank, "what have you to say?"

"It's a rotten shame!" declared Bart. "The play has been murdered! That's what's the matter. I don't believe the fault is with the piece."

"I am not so sure there is no fault with the piece," confessed Merry, greatly to Bart's astonishment.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"I have been thinking of one or two changes that I could make to improve it. If the third act does not catch on, I shall make them, too."

"I don't know but the piece is hoodooed," said Bart. "And there's that infernal cat!"

The cat came walking into the dressing room.

"That cat will yet prove the mascot of this piece," stiffly asserted Merriwell. "There is luck in her, if there's anything. Don't lay it to the cat."

They were called for the third act, and soon the curtain was raised again.

The third act was not an improvement on the others. Midway in it, while Frank, Bart and Gallup were on the stage, the Vermonter was attacked by a case of stage fright, and he "went to pieces." In vain he was given cues and lines. He could not pull himself together.

Ephraim made a pitiful spectacle in his "Rube" clothes as he stood there staring and shaking.

Some of the audience laughed, some hissed. A few got up and left. Then somebody cried:

"Fake!"

Fake! Fraud!" was the cry that went round.

A rough-looking man in the second row sprang up.

"We've been fooled out of our money!" he cried. "That chap ain't the real Frank Merriwell. Come on, fellers, and we'll clean out the crowd!"

He sprang over the first row, dashed through the orchestra, and, almost before Merriwell realized what he was doing, climbed over the footlights onto the stage.

Then Frank awoke.

With one long stride he was on the man, whom he caught by the collar and a convenient portion of his trousers and flung him clean and fair over the footlights into the orchestra.

The man was somewhat stunned, and, as he was picking himself up, Frank seized the opportunity to address the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, his voice clear and steady, "I am very sorry that we have not given you satisfaction to-night, but I want to assure you that there are no frauds or fakes on this stage. We are just what we represent ourselves to be. Things have gone wrong with the piece, but I want to tell you now that I have not lost confidence in the play, and within a year I will play it here on this stage to an appreciative audience. I will do that if I have to hire the house outright for a night and distribute tickets gratuitously. As proof that we are not here to defraud anybody, I will say that all who are dissatisfied when the performance is over can call for their money at the box office, and everyone who calls will re-

ceive it back. We are here to play this piece, and we are going through with it."

This little speech awakened some admiration and applause, and the play was resumed.

From that time it seemed to go somewhat better, and there was a faint burst of applause when the curtain descended on the third act.

Folansbee came behind again, and this time he looked utterly downcast.

"I'm afraid you went too far in offering to refund the money, Merriwell," he said. "The manager of the house is on his ear. He says we can refund what we choose, but we'll have to pay him the regular percentage on what was taken in."

"That's all right," nodded Merry, grimly. "We'll pay him. It is better to do this than to go out of this city with the reputation of frauds hitched onto us."

But when the play was over, very few persons called for their money. The audience filed out in grim silence, and Frank knew that "For Old Eli" was a dismal failure.

"But I'll keep my word," he declared to himself. "I'll play it here, and it shall be appreciated."

Failure was a new experience for Frank, but it did not crush him. He was not foolishly cheerful, nor was he wretchedly miserable. Looking at him, it was plain to see that he would survive the crash and would come out a winner in the end.

And his confidence in the black cat as a mascot had not been disturbed in the least.

"But I shall re-write the play and change a number of

characters," he said. "Not that I think thirteen makes any difference, but because I do not want any member of the cast to get a notion that the piece is hoodooed by having that number of parts."

In the morning Havener was anxious to go on with the piece, for he believed it could be whipped into shape while they were on the road; but, at an early hour, Parker Folansbee received a telegram from the manager of the theater in which they were to play that night announcing that he had received a report from Puleob and had determined to cancel their engagement.

"That settles it," said Frank, when he was shown the telegram. "We'll have to throw it up for the time, till we can get matters arranged again. I'll go at the play without delay."

"I think I'll go out of the theatrical business for good," said Folansbee. "Somehow, it seems to me that I've had enough of it."

For a moment Frank was a bit upset, and then he quietly said:

"All right, Mr. Folansbee; you are at liberty to do as you choose. Are we to sever our partnership?"

"I think we had better."

And they did so that day.

Frank had met failure, and he was left without a backer; but he was not disheartened, and he was determined to put "For Old Eli" on the road again in revised form.

"My fortune," he said, to himself, as he sat in his room

at the hotel in Puleob, "seems to be to work. And I shall win, with 'For Old Eli,' as well as with anything else. To-morrow means renewed effort."

And so, his face set hopefully to the future, Frank took up his tasks. Even in misfortune, that hopefulness and will to achieve improvement by his own labor were characteristic of Frank Merriwell, characteristic of the true and successful American.

THE END.

Charles Garvice's New Stories

If you are a novel reader, you certainly must be waiting for the appearance of a new novel from the pen of Charles Garvice. We are glad to inform you that you will find it in . . . . . .

SMITH'S MAGAZINE

In the future, all of Charles Garvice's new stories will appear in this magazine, as he is under contract to write for it exclusively. "DIANA'S DESTINY" is the title of a bright, original story, of absorbing interest. It began in the April number and is still being published . . . . . .

If you are one of the vast army who have depended upon cheap, occasional issues of early non-copyrights, of which there are now no more by this author, you will find this new tale distinctly refreshing.

In addition to a long installment of the Garvice story, there are other features which make SMITH'S MAGAZINE one of the best and most pleasing of all ten-cent publications . . . . . .

PROFUSELY ILLUSTRATED BY THE BEST ARTISTS

PRICE, TEN CENTS Sold by all Newsdealers

THE SMITH PUBLISHING HOUSE, 156 FIFTH AVENUE NEW YORK

MEDAL LIBRARY

Frank Merriwell's Fortune

By BURT L. STANDISH

No. 320